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NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

Issue Number Ten

Edited by PETER HAMILTON

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—he could not comprehend the forces working against him.*

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Back Cover by Jack Wilson

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Look here . . .

We start off on a lighter note than usual this time with a story which will come as something of a new experience to many NEBULA readers. "Anachronism" by American Charles E. Fritch, is purely and simply a science fiction comedy and should be worth a few laughs to us all; I feel that this type of story provides a very welcome relief to the destruction and sorrow in some of the other yarns—I hope you will agree

Next in line is E. C. TUBB with another of his masterly anti-war short stories. Coming as it does only a couple of months after the grim speech by Nobel-prizewinner Professor Edgar Adrian, it has that added touch of authenticity which makes it fearfully prophetic.

Professor Adrian stated that each time a Hydrogen Bomb is exploded two tons of that light radioactive substance Carbon 14 is released. This substance takes five thousand years to lose even half of its radioactivity, and consequently it needs only about one thousand H-Bombs to be exploded to destroy every life form on this planet.

Every day more tests may be taking place in both the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. so, unless we can come to our senses very soon, "Closing Time" may be enacted in reality in the not so distant future.

This edition of NEBULA again introduces two new authors to the science-fiction public and they look like being among the best before very long if they can keep up their present standard. "The Marriage Prompters" by Geoffrey

Humphrys, again in a lighter vein, is the story of how one scientist tried to cure the immorality of the future — with surprising results, while "By Needle and Thread" by Irish Richard P. Ennis combines a new plot with a sincere and forceful style of writing to give us all a new experience in science-fiction reading.

Among the Christmas displays in many toyshops here in Glasgow, I have noticed a new game for children, in which they are supplied with a box of eyes-on-stalks, tentacles, and assorted limbs and are invited to build their own Martian, Venusian or what-have-you. It is this kind of thing which may have prompted Robert Donald Locke to write "Final Curtain," though I hate to think of the logical conclusion to which he draws the present popularity of science-fiction books, magazines, films and toys which is making the public so space conscious at the moment. I suppose this yarn *could* be a warning to those of you who don't stick to *good* science fiction magazines like Nebula!

Lastly there is "Project Starship" by popular Sydney J. Bounds which is the story of how Pluto came between a husband and wife. Its authenticity and convincing plot make it in my opinion one of this authors in finest "human interest" yarns to date.

These stories with the "Special Features," another outstanding front cover from Bob Clothier and the beginning of a series of unusual "symbolic" back covers
Concluded on page 128

Anachronism

*Xylophid had been dead a million years
— yet he ate Krunchies regularly.*

Illustrated by Martin Frew

BILL Rogers, alias Sergeant Saturn, “Topkick of the Spaceways,” felt perfectly miserable. This was no small accomplishment for a person known to millions throughout the inhabited universe, but Bill managed it with practised competence. Even the television cameras seemed to regard him accusingly, as though they were considering the crime he had just committed, and he found himself feeling ill-at-ease even before their familiar presence.

Meanwhile, the world around him was in the process of coming noisily apart at the seams, for humans do not have the calm detachment of machines. From a loudspeaker catapulted the director’s uncalm voice, using words which would never, never do for the program’s dialogue. The man was shouting and running shaky fingers through already dishevelled hair and seemed about on the verge of a nervous collapse. Under his directions the rehearsal had gone smoothly, the cameras having dollied and panned as scheduled to present images of various significance to monitors in the control room. Then the boner had happened.

He could not see her, but Bill Rogers knew that the producer was in her screened observation booth also going mad by leaps and bounds; he could picture her plopping another aspirin in her mouth, swallowing it with a papercupful of water, staring at the program as though seeing it for the first time and wishing it were the last.

Things, in a word, were normal.

Bill Rogers felt miserable just the same. He sat disconsolately on the edge of a steaming radioactive crater and let the dry ice fumes boil up around him unnoticed. To millions of kids through the world, he was the epitome of heroism, but at that moment he didn't feel particularly heroic. He felt exactly like a television actor who had not only flubbed the sequence's most important line, but had managed through some perverse combination of fate and luck to make the meaning obviously pornographic.

At first, it had seemed funny. But then the horrible significance, the frightening danger, had crept into view. If it could happen once — Bill Rogers shuddered and left the thought untemplated.

A door slammed ominously, and Miss Vena I. Prentiss came stalking across the studio. She had been with the B.E.M. advertising agency for seven years, had been producer of the Sergeant Saturn show for three; she knew what she wanted and how to get it. This time would be no exception. Beneath the brilliant lights, her pretty face was like a slab of chiseled granite.

"For God's sake, Bill, what are you trying to do, ruin me and the whole show? Thank goodness this didn't happen when the show was being aired. This show is for kids. *Nice* kids, not juvenile delinquents!"

Bill shrugged helplessly and opened his mouth to stammer some sort of reply. But she rushed on:

"Suppose the sponsor had seen it, then we'd be in a fine pickle."

Bill Rogers shrugged again, also helplessly. But he knew that the sponsor, G. Hartford Gummy, saw only the show as it was aired and then chiefly to watch the commercials lauding Gummies, "the breakfast food that has no sharp kernels, no harsh irritants, and gets soggy quicker for easier, more enjoyable eating." Personally, Bill Rogers liked Krunchies, but treason was one thing and a weekly paycheck another.

"Sorry, Vena," he said finally. "It was a slip of the tongue."

"Well, see that it doesn't slip again. My God, suppose that had gone out!" She moaned and hit her hand against her forehead. "These writers! Giving us lines like that. We should rewrite the entire scene, but we haven't time. You'll just have to struggle past it."

"I'll watch out for it," Bill promised her.

She smiled and patted his hand. "Will you, Bill sweetie, for me?" she purred.

"For you," Bill assured her, "and good old Gummies."

She seemed somewhat placated by that.

"Vena," the director's voice boomed apologetically over the loudspeaker. "Mr. Gummy is at the agency; he'd like to see you and Sergeant Sat— er, Bill, right away."

"My God, during rehearsal," she moaned. "Now what does the old buzzard want, I wonder?"

"Haven't the slightest inkling," the director admitted. "He's watching the telecast that's coming from Procyon IV. He wants you to get there as soon as possible."

"Procyon IV?" Bill Rogers wondered, happy that attention was being diverted from his blunder.

"They're opening some ruins there, a tomb or something," Vena explained vaguely. "It's being sponsored by Gummies."

"Naturally." Otherwise, why look at it.

She called to the director, "George, sweetie, we're going over but we'll rush back. Sponsor or no sponsor, the Sergeant Saturn show must go on."

Famous last words, Bill told himself. He'd heard about G. Hartford Gummy, and the things he'd heard weren't nice. The man was supposed to be a crotchety old fussbudget with almost as much money as the World Mint. The thought of meeting so formidable a man made the actor feel nervous.

"Don't bother to change," Vena told him, "we'll be right back."

He nodded and followed her sudden dash across the studio. His gold-bedecked blue uniform glinted brightly beneath the brilliant lights. If clothes made the man, he wondered why he didn't feel as heroic as he looked. Perhaps that wasn't possible, though.

The elevator threw them skyward to the roof, where they flagged down an aircab and dashed above the winking lights of the evening city to the rooftop of the B.E.M. building. They landed, took an elevator which dropped them with sickening speed to the proper floor. As they entered the executive office, someone put up a warning finger to insure that the rapt attention to the television screen was not interrupted for the several men studying it.

On far-off Procyon IV, millions of light-years from Earth, an event of historic significance was taking place. The tomb of the Great Leader Xylophid, untouched for many hundreds of centuries, was about to be opened. Searchlights twitched luminous fingers across the Procyon sky; an orchestra was playing background music; several Hollywood stars

were in strapless evening gowns to attend this premiere at which none of them starred. It appeared to be a rollicking success, awaiting as a final touch only the appearance of the star, Xylophid.

Bill Rogers stared about the room. Someone shoved a chair near him and someone else guided him into it. A few feet away, seventy-year-old G. Hartford Gummy himself sat staring at the forty-inch screen and furiously masticated a long thick unlit cigar. Several other firms, including Krunchy Foods Incorporated, had bid for sponsorship of the program, but the more financially stable Gummies Incorporated had won out. Mr. Gummy didn't care to sponsor it, really, for he preferred the simple things in life to the educational ones, but when it was pointed out to him that he had a good chance of realizing a substantial increase in sales and thus more money in his bank account, he agreed a bit more readily.

On Procyon IV, television cameras were placed at strategic intervals, with experienced Earth operators at the controls. Delicate ultrawaves went pulsing through multicircuits, then along quivering antennae, and finally were cast out into space, where they sped at many times the speed of light toward receivers on all the inhabited planets.

"Well, G.H.," Mr. B. of the B.E.M. advertising agency said enthusiastically, "what do you think? Great, isn't it?"

Mr. Gummy rolled the cigar between his frail lips, removed it carefully, regarded it solemnly for a suspense-filled moment, then barked: "Where's the commercial? All this time's costing me money. I want to see commercials, not this stuff. I'm paying you people good money—"

"Now, G.H.," placated Mr. M. in his soothingest tones, "we can have only so much commercial time, you know. The Interplanetary Trade Commission allows us only fifteen minutes of commercial for every thirty minutes of air time!"

"It's a stupid rule," G. Hartford Gummy barked.

Annoyed, he threw his unlit cigar on the floor and took a fresh one from his pocket. Someone automatically leaped forward with a cigar lighter, but Mr. Gummy irritably waved him away.

"I don't pay to have these silly programs put on," he continued, stabbing the air with the cigar. "I pay for the commercial, so people can see what I'm spending my money for, so they can go out and buy Gummies and make me a rich man."

"But — er — you *are* a rich man, G. H."

"A richer man, then. One thing you can't have too much of is money."

He started to turn a disapproving look upon the one who had taken the initiative to remind him of his wealth, but his attention was fortun-

ately diverted by a movement on the television screen. Mr. Gummy's features broke into a smile and he settled back in his chair and uttered: "Aaah!" This last was a sigh of ecstasy as the bleak landscape of Procyon IV faded from the television screen, with the warning that, "We will now have a brief word from our sponsor."

Six shapely girls appeared, cavorting about the screen in regulation space costumes of halter, shorts and transparent spaceboots, waving their extensions and chanting:

"Gummies — Gummies — Gummies —

"Are Best — for Hungry — Tummies!"

They repeated this refrain seven times, dancing in apparent ecstasy as they did so.

In the B.E.M. office, G. Hartford Gummy smiled a broad, wrinkled smile of deep satisfaction and tapped out the repetitious melody with his cigar and a nearby desk. When it was finished, he said, "By Gummy—" it was a phrase he was trying to inject among the current colloquialisms—"that's a commercial!"

Mr. Gummy glared at him, and Mr. E. dutifully cringed. But Mr. Gummy was too engrossed in the commercial to take time out to say anything nasty; besides, a single glare of disapproval most times was sufficient to put one in his proper place — especially when the glarer had as much money as Mr. Gummy had, and the glaree wanted to get his hands on some of that money.

The commercial lasted the full fifteen minutes, extolling the virtues and glories of Gummies, using plenty of sex, brassy jingles and animated cornflakes for that purpose. At the precise moment it faded from the screen Mr. Gummy pressed the button on his stopwatch and consulted its dial to determine whether or not he had gotten his money's worth. Everyone in the room leaned forward expectantly, then let out a chorus of barely audible sighs of relief as Mr. Gummy nodded his head in apparent satisfaction and replaced the stopwatch. Bill Rogers felt relief flow through him and realised suddenly that tenseness can be contagious.

G. Hartford Gummy tossed his unused cigar over a shoulder and took out another one, divesting it carefully of its cellophane clothing. He glanced with casual disinterest at the blue and gold figure sitting near him, then turned away to look at the television screen that once more bore the dull face of Procyon IV. Sudden remembrance flowed into his cracked features, and he hopped out of his chair and grabbed the hand of a suddenly-startled Bill Rogers and pumped it with surprising vigour.

"Sergeant Saturn," he wheezed, "am I glad to see you: yes, sir, am I glad to see you. I certainly am glad to see you, believe me. How did you get back from Aldebaran so soon?"



"Aldebaran, sir?" Bill wondered, still a bit bewildered from the onslaught.

"Oh—hoh, the galactic drive, I bet," Mr. Gummy said, nudging Bill with his elbow and looking pleased with his own sharp perception of things interspatial. "Last night on channel twenty you were fighting Black Benn over possession of the Boomstron Ray near a dangerously radioactive crater. I suppose you've got to hurry back up there and get it over with?"

"What? But, sir, I've only——"

"Of course," G. Hartford Gummy said enthusiastically. "My, how I envy you, Sergeant, all those adventures. Yes, even me, with all my money, I envy you." He leaned forward confidentially. "Listen, how about taking me along when you go back?"

"Er——back, sir?"

"Back to Alderbaran, Sergeant, back to Aldebaran, of course," Mr. Gummy said, frowning at the noncommittal answers he was receiving. Sudden suspicion showed in his face. "You've got to go back for tonight's show haven't you."

"Well ——"

"He certainly has," Vena Prentiss broke in.

Around him, Bill Rogers saw grown men quivering on the edges of their chairs in fearful expectation, as though they were expecting the world to end in the next few seconds. At the producer's words, they went limp with relief.

Vena went on in her sweetest voice: "But I'm afraid you'll find yourself much too valuable right here on Earth, Mr. Gummy. But perhaps later, when you can find time. Isn't that right, Bi — er — Sergeant Saturn?" She kicked Bill in the leg.

"Ouch," he responded. "I mean — well, sure, why not?"

But he could readily think of a reason why not. Except for weekend trips to the Lunar Resort, Bill Rogers had not left Earth in any of his thirty-one years and had no desire to do so.

"Gummy!" Mr. Gummy applauded. "We must talk about it some time later, and I'll let you know when I can come. I'm no rookie when it comes to space travel, you know." He glanced at his watch and noted in a suddenly stern voice: "Twelve minutes to the next commercial." He shook his head impatiently. "It's not like the old days."

On Procyon IV things were progressing as anticipated. The thick atomic torches blazed away at the sealings of the door to Xvlophid's tomb, and in the next few seconds the fastenings melted into nothingness. Four men in space suits sprang forward into camera range to tug

at the door, which slowly swung outward at their insistence. Inside was darkness, a mustiness you could almost feel, even across the millions of miles and via television. Torches made daylight out of the interior to reveal a long dullmetal corridor.

Bill Rogers leaned forward, for these things interested him. Nearby, G. Hartford Gummy yawned, consulted his watch again, and tapped a nervous refrain on the desk beside him. He began mumbling the lyrics to an off-key Gummy commercial, keeping time by swinging his cigar and plunking it against anything within immediate reach. Bill felt an urge rise within him to grab the old man by his skinny neck and do unsanitary things to it. That would be the professional and possibly literal end to Bill Rogers, of course, but it might be worth it.

On Procyon IV, the cameras went forward into the tunnel, preceded by searching beams of artificial daylight. At the end of the corridor was an open doorway. They passed through. The room beyond was a chamber, and in the center of it on a platform lay Xylophid encased in a transparent cylinder. The cameras dollied forward.

"Look," one of the B.E.M. executives said excitedly, "he has a box in his hand." Then he looked up apologetically, fearing he might have spoken out of turn. But even G. Hartford Gummy was peering intently at the screen as the image of Xylophid grew larger there, and no one took notice of the outburst.

There was in fact a box in Xylophid's hand, labeled in scarlet letters. Bill Rogers strained his eyes to see what the label said. It would be in the language of Procyon IV, of course, which meant he wouldn't understand it, but he looked anyway. But the box disappeared as a cameraman took a closeup of Xylophid's face, a strong face with a suggestion of humor about the lips, as though he had died contemplating some slightly ribald story.

Someone in the B.E.M. office cursed without realizing he had done so. Bill Rogers felt annoyance creep over him, and a few well-chosen words of his own came to mind. But the camera apologized by panning down along the still body of the once-great emperor to the box in his hand.

For a brief moment the image was out of focus, then it cleared automatically. A stark silence filled the room.

G. Hartford Gummy sat bolt upright in his chair, as though he had received a shot of electricity where it hurt the most. The cigar fell from his fingers and made a dull plop on the floor. He blinked furiously. His wrinkled features contorted in a look of disbelief. He half-rose from the chair, and a sort of choking gasp came from his throat. Then he fell in a still heap on the floor.

But no one paid him any attention. All eyes were staring at the box in Xylophid's hand, a hand that must have been undisturbed for countless centuries beneath its airtight casing. Millions of eyes stared at it from all portions of the universe, as the Gummy-sponsored program unfolded. The cameramen and their directors were evidently as shocked as had been the prostrate Mr. Gummy and everyone in the B.E.M. office, including even the forceful Miss Prentiss, or they would have cut off the image of that incredible and terrifying anachronism.

For clutched firmly in Xylophid's lifeless fingers was an unmistakable symbol of the culture of the present day — a box of Krunchies!

"It couldn't possibly happen, it couldn't," moaned one of the advertising men, pacing back and forth and waving his arms in a distracted fashion. "They didn't have Krunchies back in those days. They didn't even have space-travel among the star-systems then."

"Then how do you account for it?" Vena wanted to know. They had carted off a mumbling G. Hartford Gummy to a quieter place to have his nervous breakdown, but Vena had managed to regain her composure. "Impossible or not, it's going to influence sales of Gummies like nothing else has — and in the wrong direction!"

"I don't know," Mr. B. said, looking like a lost sheepdog. "The only thing I can think of is that this is the end of the Bumstead, Engel-meyer and Merkowitz Agency." He let out a long low groan and sank weakly into a chair.

"The only logical way a box of Krunchies could have gotten there," Vena pointed out, "is for the Krunchy people to have put it there. Don't ask me how, I don't know — but it's the only way. Now, if we can prove they did this and encroached on our advertising rights —"

Mr. E. shook his head sadly. "But even if we win the case, even if we can prove it, we'll just lose face by admitting their cleverness."

"You've already lost face," Vena said. "The only thing we can do now is strike back at them and hope for the best." At a sudden thought, she said, "What did Mr. Gummy want to see me about?"

"Oh," Mr. M. said, remembering. "He had a brilliant thought. He wanted to tell you to have boxes of Gummies around the sets so viewers can see them between commercials, and perhaps even have some of the actors eating Gummies when the action isn't too strenuous."

From his silent corner Bill Rogers groaned with the contemplation of this latest brainstorm, and Vena darted a sharp look in his direction. She tried to smile sweetly, but it was plain the thought disturbed even her. Then, her pretty features contorted at a further thought.

"The program!" she exclaimed, remembering. She leaped up, glancing at her watch. "We've got to get back to the studio."

With Bill in tow, Vena headed for the door, but it opened before she got to it, and a nervous-looking copywriter said, "Mr. Gummy wants to see you, Miss Prentiss."

"Later," Miss Prentiss told him.

"He says it's a matter of life and death," the man insisted helplessly, blocking her path.

"I'm sure of it," Vena said, looking a little disgusted. "He probably wants to change the name of the hero to Sergeant Gummy!"

"You'd better see him, Vena," Mr. E. suggested, looking wan. "You know how G. H. can be when he's distraught."

Vena shrugged helplessly. "Okay, okay, but if Sergeant Saturn here doesn't get to Aldebaran on time —"

"He wants to see Sergeant Saturn, too," the copywriter said, remembering. "Most of all, in fact."

Bill Rogers looked up, startled, and Vena's previous remarks echoed in his mind. The thought of being called Sergeant Gummy disturbed him more than he'd been disturbed in a long time. Nevertheless, he followed Vena and the copywriter down the hall to another office, where G. Hartford Gummy lay stretched out, pale and sick-looking, on a couch with three doctors hovering professionally nearby.

When he saw them, Mr. Gummy leaped to a sitting position and croaked, "Vena, Sergeant Saturn, you've got to help me."

"Anything we can do," Vena said, and Bill Rogers nodded dutifully.

G. Hartford Gummy's small eyes grew hard. "Go to Procyon IV," he told Bill. "Forget about Black Benny on Aldebaran; you can take care of him later. Right now, you have a bigger opponent — the Krunchy people on Aldebaran!"

Bill Rogers' mouth dropped open in astonishment. "But, sir —"

"Sergeant Saturn'll get onto it right away, Mr. Gummy," Vena promised quickly, patting the old man's hand. She began backing away, nudging Bill. "Meanwhile, you just get lots of rest."

Bill said, "But Vena —" helplessly, and promptly received a vicious elbow in his stomach.

"Let me know when you're leaving, Sergeant," Mr. Gummy wheezed.

"He will, he will, Mr. Gummy," Vena promised, smiling artificially. She found herself in the corridor and closed the door thankfully upon the sponsor and his attendants.

"But, Vena," Bill protested, "he's going to find out I'm not going to Procyon, so why promise it? Why not just tell him I'm an underpaid actor and not the real thing. You'd think a man his age —"

"Because," Vena said coldly, "I'm not letting you bite the hand that feeds both of us. If G. Hartford Gummy thinks Sergeant Saturn is the real thing, let him think so; if he knew it was all just make-believe, he might get peeved and not sponsor the show. I'd be out of a job, and you know where you'd be.

"Back at the glue factory," Bill agreed glumly. "Okay," he sighed, "but when he finds I'm on Aldebaran for tonight's show, he's going to get mighty suspicious."

"We'll think of something," Vena said confidently. "The show!" she screeched as an afterthought. "C'mon!"

Bill Rogers had no choice in the matter but to go. Vena had his arm and went racing down the hall with it. They whisked to the roof in an elevator, whisked across the city in an aircab, whisked down an elevator to the studio. During the entire trip, Vena was muttering curses at the fates that had delayed them.

"In ten minutes the show'll go on," she cried out, sending imploring glances to heaven. "Please, Bill, for my sake, for your sake, for all our sakes, get that one line right. Pretty please? For me?"

"For you," Bill promised again, adding with a marked lack of enthusiasm, "and good old Gummies."

When they went in, the studio was in an uproar. The director was on three telephones trying to locate Vena and Sergeant Saturn. Assistants were running back and forth bumping into each other, harassed looks on their faces. Loud voices were testifying to frayed tempers.

The arrival of the sought-fors brought sudden relief, but it did not still the pandemonium. Bill Rogers was called aside, where the director described last-minute changes in a very annoyed voice. When all was ready, Vena went to watch the show via a monitor and Sergeant Saturn took his place by a steaming radioactive crater and put a heroic look on his face.

"Thirty seconds," the director called.

"Sergeant Saturn, Topkick of the Spaceways" got under way thirty seconds later, with opening spacial music and a brief Gummy commercial which insisted that anyone who didn't buy Gummies was an idiot. After that, Black Benny made nasty faces through and around his villainous mustache while stalking Sergeant Saturn through the jungles of Aldebaran. By the time the next commercial arrived, Sergeant Saturn had been pushed into the steaming radioactive crater and was about to be parboiled there.

When the commercial started, Bill Rogers peeked out of his crater to view the world, and Black Benny apologized for having pushed him just a little bit harder than he had intended, and Sergeant Saturn said

that it was okay, that he wasn't hurt the least bit and how about getting a beer after the show. Black Benny said it would be fine and added puzzled, "Say, Vena's motioning; I guess she wants you."

Bill looked, and there indeed was Vena at the Edge of the great papier-mache jungle, gesturing frantically for him to come over. He hopped out of his crater and made a dash across the studio.

"What's up," he said, breathless. "I've got to get back."

"Gummy was watching the show," she told him; "he just called up and said for you to get out of that crater and get rid of Black Benny, because you're wanted on Procyon IV. We've got to end the sequence now."

"What? But we've got another week —"

"We *had* another week," she corrected. "Get out of that crater and blast down Black Benny, in a nice way, of course."

"But —"

"Don't argue," she insisted. "Do it!"

Dazedly, Bill Rogers returned to his crater and climbed into it. He told the hovering Black Benny what was going to happen, and the villain shrugged stoically and said that they'd have to pay him for the full week to come anyway and this'd give him some time with his family for a change.

The director signaled, and the commercial went off. Sergeant Saturn hauled himself out of his crater, ad-libbed a few appropriate words and shot Black Benny, who promptly staggered as though hit and let everyone know that he was only paralyzed and would be sent back to Earth for rehabilitation and to discover that crime does not pay nearly as much as he thought it did.

While they were filling in the rest of the program with commercials and unrelated film clips, Bill went back to ask how come, in detail.

"He actually wasn't kidding," Vera said. "G. Hartford Gummy wants you to go to Procyon IV."

"How are we going to get out of that?" Bill wondered.

"We're not," Vena answered levelly. "I told him your ship with the galactic drive was broken, and he said he'd buy the fastest regular spaceship to get you there."

Bill felt a sudden chill of apprehension pass through him. "What do you mean, we're not getting out of it?"

"G. Hartford Gummy insists on going along with you, that's why," she said, "and all the king's horses and all the king's men aren't going to talk him out of it. So you're going."

"Hey! Wait a minute——"



"And I'm going with you, too," she said, certain of herself, "to make sure you don't say or do anything you shouldn't."

"I won't do it."

"This means a lot to me, Bill. It means a lot to you, too, whether you know it or not, and I won't let you throw it away. I could force you, but I'd rather you decided for yourself."

She stood before him, looking suddenly like a schoolgirl who's just discovered she was a woman, and ran her fingers slowly up and down his blue and gold lapel.

Her voice was soft, compelling. "Please, Bill, for me?"

Bill gulped. "Well —" She'd been close to him before, but somehow it was different this time. That look in her eyes made impossible urges flow through him. "But I've never been farther than the Moon," he stammered finally.

"The ships these days are practically automatic," she said softly; "they almost drive themselves." She looked up at him, eyes wide and fluttery. "Won't you at least try? Please? Pretty please?"

Her hand stole onto the back of his neck, and pleasant chills of anticipation surged through him. He'd never noticed before how blue her eyes were, and a calm portion of his mind noted the fact. But the rest of him was chaotic, and he could feel himself trembling. He wet his lips.

"Well," he said, "well —"

"I knew you would," Vena cried triumphantly, and she threw enthusiastic arms about him and kissed him full on the lips.

Bill Rogers staggered back, pleasantly stunned, and sank into a chair. He blinked his eyes rapidly. "I suppose I could at least try," he admitted breathlessly.

The spaceship *Gummy I* took off in a flash of fire and headed for outer space. Despite the pills Vena had forced down his throat, Bill felt spacesickness nauseate him. Vena had also promised to increase his salary, and he tried to dwell upon that more comforting thought.

G. Hartford Gummy frowned importantly at him. "I should think, Sergeant, that you'd want to pilot the spaceship yourself, instead of trusting it to machinery. But I suppose even this seems slow after the Galactic Drive?"

"Well —" Bill began uncertainly.

"That's it, Mr. Gummy," Vena put in. "Anyone can pilot a normal spaceship, that's why we're using the automatic drive. Besides, Sergeant Saturn has to concentrate on a plan for trapping these people."

"That's right," Bill declared as enthusiastically as his stomach

would let him. He turned suddenly green as the ship accelerated. And I think I've got to do a little concentrating — right now!" He dashed from the room, holding his mouth.

G. Hartford Gummy looked after him, puzzled, and Vena explained, "That radioactive crater took a lot out of him."

"It looks like it's going to take out a little more," the sponsor observed. "This is fun," he went on, "more fun than I've had in years. Imagine! Here I am with Sergeant Saturn on one of his adventures." He looked around him at a sudden thought. "Er — are we being televised?"

"No," Vena assured him. "We didn't want the Krunchy people to know what we're doing, so we didn't bring the cameras along this time."

G. Hartford Gummy nodded sagely. "By Gummy, that's clever. That's clever, all right. Now, why didn't I think of that?"

"You will," Vena said, a bit wearily.

"What?" He turned a hard gaze on her.

Vena smiled sweetly. "I said, 'Here's Bill.'"

Fortunately for her rhyme and her reason, Bill actually appeared, looking pale and not happy at all.

"False alarm," he said, without enthusiasm.

"Bill, eh?" Mr. Gummy marveled, seizing on that gem of information. "I've often wondered what Sergeant Saturn's first name was. Bill Saturn, eh? Well!"

Bill was too weak to bother explaining, and with a following thought he decided that explaining might destroy Mr. Gummy's illusion; he knew that a disillusioned G. Hartford Gummy could be real nasty. So he just kept his mouth shut (for more than one reason), and Vena shot him a grateful look.

"Would you like to go up to the observation platform, Mr. Gummy?" Vena suggested.

"What's up there?"

"Stars," Bill said glumly. "Nothing but plain ordinary stars. Maybe you two can figure a way to rearrange them to spell out the word Gummies."

Vena's pretty face darkened, and she glared at the actor, fingers clenching as though she had a throat in them.

But G. Hartford Gummy's eyes lit up. "By Gummy," he exclaimed with enthusiasm, "that's an idea. That is an idea. That's an idea, all right." His eyes took on a dreamy gaze. "The stars," he breathed, picturing it, "spelling out Gummies."

Eagerly, he went out the door. Vena paused, turning to glare at

the grinning blue-and-gold clad figure.

"I'll be back," she threatened, "and you'd better be right here. I've got a few things to say to you, Bill Rogers."

Bill shrugged and turned his attention back to his stomach, which seemed intent upon imitating a vagrant whirlpool. Ever since the spaceship had blasted off he'd felt certain that sometime during the next several minutes he was going to depart this world for some heaven that was devoid of spaceships and sponsors. It was an alternative that was not altogether displeasing.

Wearily he sank into a nearby chair and tried to think of things not relating to his stomach and the spaceship that insisted on misusing it. He wondered if he could change his vocation and become a plumber. Or — less radical thought! — maybe find another program with a less realistic (or was it unrealistic?) sponsor. He might even be able to get a job with Krunchies. If he could stand a Gummy commercial, he was certain he could stand a Krunchy commercial. As he thought of it, one popped into his head complete with orchestral backing, and he allowed it to romp unhampered through his mind:

"Krunch, Krunch, Krunch you'll Krunch your Krunchies.

"Krunch, Krunch, Krunch you'll Krunch each Krunch!

"Krunch, Krunch, Krunch you'll Krunch your Krunchies . . ."

He paused uncertainly. A blank look appeared on his face, followed by a look of intense concentration. Now what the devil was that last line, he wondered?

Softly he sang the first three lines into the empty room and then paused again uncertainly, trying to recall the fourth. Something to rhyme with Krunch, he reminded. Bunch? Crunch? Dunch? Funch? Gunch? he thought systematically. Punch? Yunch? Runch? Quunch? he thought a little more wildly, throwing system to the winds. He shook his head disconcertedly.

"Maybe if I start over again," he told himself aloud, "and pretend I don't know I can't think of the last line, I'll get it."

He mentally patted himself on the back for this shrewd manoeuvre then made his mind a blank and began singing the commercial in a loud clear voice. He sang:

"Krunch, Krunch, Krunch you'll Krunch your Krunchies.

"Krunch, Krunch, Krunch you'll Krunch each Krunch . . ."

"Well," Vena exclaimed from the doorway, "isn't this a pretty picture."

Bill looked up, startled, and felt his cheeks flame with sudden embarrassment. "Uh," he explained, "uh, I was just — er —"

"That's what I thought you were doing," Vena said. "I know

you're simpleminded, but Mr. Gummy might not understand. I suggest you try to hold the treason down to a minimum."

"But —"

She interrupted him by thrusting a bulky sheaf of typewritten pages under his nose. "Here's a script I had the writers do in a hurry. It just came in over the teleport. A bunch of actors are going to come swarming over us when we land; from then on, stick to the script."

Bill took the papers and looked at them as though the script was about to bite him. He said, "But —"

"Look," she said, eyeing him sternly. "The Krunchy people got away with something, and old J. Herbert Krunchy is probably laughing in his oatmeal right now. It was clever, but short of a confession we haven't much chance of proving they did it, and even then it wouldn't do us any good commercially. So the only thing that can come of this expedition is for Mr. Gummy to be happy in thinking Sergeant Saturn did something about his competitors."

Bill Rogers nodded understanding. "So we're going to enact a little Sergeant Saturn drama exclusively for the sponsor's enjoyment, is that it?"

"That's it, exactly."

"I don't like it."

"W-h-a-t?"

"I don't like it," he said, a little more timorously this time. "It — well, it seems underhanded."

"Of course it's underhanded," Vena exclaimed; "what did you expect, a Sunday school picnic?"

Bill shrugged. "No, but —"

"Now you listen to me, Bill Rogers." Vena's eyes flashed fire, fixing him with a glare that had made stronger men cringe. "You're a good guy, but don't go getting ethical on us. Ethics aren't used in this business any more; the Krunchy people proved that when they interfered with our telecast from Procyon. To keep Gummy happy we've got to make you look heroic, and then maybe later we can figure a way to get even with our competitors. But first problems first."

"Okay," Bill agreed glumly. "But do me a favour and keep Gummy stargazing while I memorize this, will you? He makes me nervous."

"There's a tape recorder over in the corner," Vena said. "You can talk this script into that and play it back over the Sondheim Learner when you're asleep tonight."

"Do I get overtime for working while I'm asleep?"

"Don't be mercenary," she admonished in a tone indicating she

wasn't certain whether he was serious or not. "And stick to the script. If you want me I'll be upstairs with Mr. Gummy giving him the fifty cent tour."

"How romantic!" Bill thought wryly. At least it might really be for a couple other than Vena I. Prentiss and G. Hartford Gummy. Vena, though pretty enough, seemed determined to have a career instead of a husband. And Mr. Gummy was a bachelor, probably confirmed by this time, whose main interest seemed to be the production of bigger and soggier Gummies.

He recalled, though, how Vena had called upon her feminine wiles to lure him aboard the spaceship, and this rather pleasant memory made his observation a critical one as he watched her move across the room. Mentally, he gave out with a long, low appreciative whistle and wondered why he had not really noticed Vena's physical attributes before.

She paused at the door and said, "The tape recorder's in the corner, not where you're looking."

Bill blushed again, but even through his embarrassment he could see she was inwardly pleased at his attention. She laughed pleasantly and disappeared from sight. But even with her gone, the burning sensation in his cheeks remained. It was strange the way one time she was almost warmly feminine, the next a cold calculating business woman, running hot and cold like an uncertain faucet. He wondered if perhaps a few pipes weren't crossed in her plumbing.

This last thought so amused him, he chuckled right into the mike of the tape recorder and forgot to erase it. He was talking out the middle of page fourteen, where he was about to rescue Mr. Gummy from a horde of drooling bug-eyes, when a great jarring *clunk* shook the spaceship and the sponsor himself came tearing frantically into the room.

"Sergeant Saturn!" Gummy wheezed, evidently distraught, "We're being invaded! Alien monsters! Outside the ship! They're coming aboard! You've got to do something! Repel the invaders!"

"Take it easy, Mr. Gummy," Bill Rogers advised. "Here, sit down."

Mr. Gummy sat down, but it was obvious he was not in the mood for taking it easy. He twitched nervously and bubbled at the mouth. He gasped, "Don't just stand there, Sergeant — *do* something."

Bill nodded helplessly and looked about for something to do. Vena rushed in.

"What's this about alien monsters?" he asked her.

Vena shook her head. "This isn't in the script at all," she said, looking worried. "It's an Earth ship. They've clamped on to us and

merged airlocks. We're probably going to get some visitors in a few minutes."

"Visitors?" Bill said weakly. He wished suddenly he were back on Earth performing the studio adventures of Sergeant Saturn. This was for real, and he wasn't certain he liked it.

"Don't just stand there, Sergeant," Mr. Gummy begged, "do *something!*"

Bill looked desperately about the room for a weapon of some kind. He realized the need to display some kind of heroics, though the sinking sensation in his stomach testified to a feeling that was not heroic in the slightest. His glance fell on the tape recorder, which he'd forgotten to shut off. He made a move towards it.

"Hold it!" a harsh voice said from the doorway. "Don't nobody move."

A rough looking Earthman stood in the doorway, an ugly pistol in one hairy hand.

Mr. Gummy leaped up. "You can't get away with this," he screeched. "Maybe you don't know who I am —"

"Shaddup!" the man said.

Mr. Gummy's mouth promptly fell open, but no further sound issued from it.

"Er — see here," Bill ventured, trying to make his voice sound friendly, "I don't see why —"

"That goes for you too, buster," the man growled, shaking the pistol menacingly. "You can do your talking with the boss."

"The boss?" Vena questioned.

The man nodded, glancing into the corridor. "Here he comes now."

There was a noise in the corridor and a short, wrinkled man appeared. It was—

"J. Herbert Krunchy!" Vena exclaimed.

Bill Rogers stared. Without Vena's identification, he might not have recognized the man. Boxes of Krunchies bore his picture, but the photo must have been retouched to resemble what the man thought he looked like.

Mr. Gummy pointed an accusing finger. "You —" he said, trembling with pent-up rage.

"Quite correct," J. Herbert Krunchy admitted, smiling a smile of triumph. "You don't look well at all, G.H.; perhaps you should switch to a more healthful cereal like Krunchies."

"Gummies are best for hungry tummies," G. Hartford Gummy retorted defensively.

"Research shows Krunchies are more popular," Mr. Krunchy countered. "Why even Xylophid used them."

While the rough looking man with the gun guffawed loudly, Mr. Gummy turned purple. "Sergeant," he pleaded, "do something."

"That was a pretty neat trick," Bill Rogers said admiringly. "How did you get that box of Krunchies in Xylophid's hand?"

"Are you crazy?" Vena admonished. "This is no time for starting a mutual admiration society. Why don't you —"

"Vena!" he said, silencing her with a hard stare and a tone of voice which surprised even him. "I was talking to Mr. Krunchy, if you don't mind." Turning to that person, he continued, "I was going to say that it was an intensely clever trick, and you must be a very brilliant man to have thought of it."

J. Herbert Krunchy blushed modestly. "Why, thank you, Sergeant. My technicians actually worked it out, but I must confess that I — ha, ha — had the original idea."

He went on to explain very proudly how they had created a studio setup based on pictures of Xylophid and of other tombs that had been opened.

"Then we simply blocked out your sending area on Procyon IV and sent our own picture of "Xylophid" — with a box of Krunchies tucked securely in his hand — to all the relay stations."

"Clever," Bill mused.

"Diabolical and underhanded," Vena amended, "that's what it is. Wait till the Interplanetary Trade Commission hears of this."

"You'll have to prove it," J. Herbert smirked, certain of his safety, "which may be a bit difficult."

Bill Rogers smiled a self-satisfied sort of smile as he thought of the tape recorder which had saved Krunchy's confession for all posterity to hear. He knew that in this scientific age a voice recording was as good as fingerprints were a few centuries ago. Perhaps Sergeant Saturn might pull a few real life heroics, after all.

"What do you want with us?" Vena demanded. "Are you afraid we'll be able to prove it?"

"Dear me, no," J. Herbert Krunchy said. "The only way you can prove it is with a confession, and — ha, ha — you certainly won't get that."

Bill smiled to himself, enjoying his secret.

"I didn't see any point in Sergeant Saturn here going all the way to Procyon IV," the Krunchies sponsor continued in a benevolent tone; "especially when I have an offer to make him."

"We're not interested in any offers!" Vena snapped, as though that were that.

"What kind of offer?" Bill asked calmly.

"Bill!" Vena's voice was shocked, and had a suggestion of hurt in it.

"To be sponsored by Krunchies," J. Herbert said, drawing himself up proudly at the name, "at twice whatever this idiot is paying you."

G. Hartford Gummy had been morosely silent, but at that statement he spluttered like an obtuse rocket. "See here," he began indignantly, but Krunchy's burly henchman let out a mean snarl and waved him silent with the gun.

"Well, what do you say, Sergeant?"

"Bill — you wouldn't."

"Double the pay, eh?" Bill mused.

"Bill — you can't!"

"The devil I can't!"

He considered the injustices under the regime of the Gummies king, the kowtowing, the idiotic copy foisted upon the televiewing public. His spacesickness had left him, but he still recalled much too well the physical discomfort forced on him by the whims of the sponsor. For a moment he teetered on the edge of a decision, with temptation tugging at him to accept. Sergeant Saturn, he remembered, was a man of action.

J. Herbert Krunchy withdrew an official looking paper from one pocket and a pen from another. "Good. I just happen to have a contract here, all drawn up and ready for your signature."

On impulse, Bill Rogers took the pen and scrawled his signature on the dotted line.

"Bill!" Vena's voice rang with disappointment.

"Fine," J. Herbert Krunchy enthused, scooping up the contract. "One thing, though — you'll have to change your name to Sergeant Krunchy!"

Bill's head snapped erect. "W-h-a-t!"

"Of course. It's in the contract," Krunchy said, winking slyly.

"This should set a new sales record for Krunchies."

Bill Rogers felt sick, but not from space. He recalled too late that Krunchies commercials were not really not much better than Gummies and would probably not improve with age. Chances were also excellent that the new sponsor would not be any better than the old one; this name change indicated that. What was that saying, he wondered, about the frying pan and the fire?

"Bill, how could you?" Vena's voice held a bewildered bitterness.

Bill felt like a heel. There had been good times, he remembered,

with the old gang. Vena. The director. Black Benny. He remembered Vena's growing attention to him — now a thing of the past.

G. Hartford Gummy sniffled. "I never would have believed it," he muttered in a croaking, unbelieving, disillusioned voice. "My hero, Sergeant Saturn." He went on, in a suddenly mercenary tone, "And not only that, you've left the tape recorder on. Electricity costs money. I don't pay out my good money to have tape recorders left on!"

J. Herbert Krunchy turned white at the revelation. He pointed an accusing finger at Bill Rogers. "You've recorded our conversation," he choked. "My confession!"

"Bill!" Vena's voice held admiration this time.

Krunchy glanced hastily at the contract to make certain nothing was wrong with that. He turned even whiter. "You — you've signed the wrong name!" he spluttered. "The contract's no good."

Mr. Gummy leaped in the air, cackling gleefully. "By Gummy, Sergeant, you've come through after all."

Though seldom an opportunist, Bill recognized the opportunity. The knock came clear and loud, and he answered it as never before. To Krunchy, he said in his most manly television voice, "We've got you now, J. Herbert Krunchy. You may as well surrender."

The rival sponsor glowered darkly. "Not as long as I can take that tape and destroy it." To his henchmen, he spat, "Get it!"

The big man lumbered forward, a look of intense purpose on his ugly face. In that moment, Bill Rogers felt his world crumbling. In his one chance to be a real hero, his bluff had failed, and now Krunchy would have his way. He knew in that moment of indecision that what he really wanted was his old job back, with Vena to boss him around and the Gummies sponsor to admire him for the hero he wasn't. All this was slipping from view.

As the henchman went to go past him, Bill shot out his fist in desperation and buried it in the man's stomach. The next move was automatic, for only a few weeks ago Sergeant Saturn had used this manoeuvre to capture an armed smuggler. As the man doubled like a closing jack-knife, Bill's palm cut down on the back of his neck, where a sudden sharp jab at some obscure nerve was (according to the script) supposed to knock the man unconscious. The man grunted and sprawled in a heap on the floor, unconscious.

"Well, I'll be damned," Bill said, gazing in awe at the fallen figure.

"Very likely," Vena said, "if you scare us any more like that." Her voice was wrv, but she could not keep an admiring twinge from it.

J. Herbert Krunchy was growing paler by the second. He looked

at his henchman on the floor and at the tape recorder and at the door near him, not knowing which way to turn.

Bill strode forward and snatched the contract from the man's trembling fingers. He then proceeded to tear it into pieces. "That," he said relieved, "is that."

"Look, Sergeant," Krunchy croaked, a pleading look on his face. "Maybe we can come to some agreement. I'm not really a bad guy. This was all done in a spirit of good, clean, wholesome fun."

"Ha!" Vena snapped.

"You can't crawl out of it now," Mr. Gummy chortled, pleased with the way things had turned out. "We've got your voice recorded saying that you plotted and planned the whole thing, and I won't stop until my lawyers have your head on the chopping block."

"Hold on, Mr. Gummy," Bill said, shaking his head to still the older man's enthusiasm for seeing a head roll, "you've forgotten one thing. Despite the fact that Mr. Krunchy is in the wrong, he still has an edge on you commercially. You can prosecute him and you might win a favourable decision, but while you were doing it you'd also be advertising the fact that he put one over on you. If I'm not mistaken, sales of Krunchies will go even higher than they will merely over the Xylophid incident. Am I right, Vena?"

Vena looked at him in bewilderment. "Yes," she admitted reluctantly, "but —"

"Then there's only one thing you can do," he continued, thus encouraged, "and that's to combine your resources, merge the two firms, and make cereal together."

In simultaneous disbelief three shocked voices said, "W-h-a-t?"

"Of course," Bill went on, trying to sound as though the fact were obvious. "Each of you has the other over a barrel in some manner, so you've got to compromise. The only way to get out of this predicament is to pretend the incident was planned as a preliminary to the merger. You can call the cereal —" He thought for a moment and then shuddered briefly. "You can call it — Krunch-Gummies!"

"No!" J. Herbert Krunchy and G. Hartford Gummy exploded together.

"It's crazy," Vena put in, though a bit weakly.

"Singly," Bill pointed out patiently, "you're making a good deal of money. Together, you could make at least twice as much and probably more since you wouldn't have to spend money fighting each other."

This mercenary mathematics visibly impressed the two men.

"Well —" Mr. Gummy said uncertainly, looking at J. Herbert Krunchy.

"Well —" Mr. Krunchy said uncertainly, looking at G. Hartford Gummy.

"He's right," Vena put in. "A merger would all but sew up the cereal market. People would almost have to buy the product."

The two men looked at each other warily for a few seconds in an attempt to get used to the idea.

"Well, we could at least talk about it," they admitted.

Bill Rogers grinned a self-satisfied grin at this step in the right direction. This business of being a hero wasn't too difficult, after all; all you had to do was keep at it. He was proud that he had come through in true Sergeant Saturn style, but he was even happier with the further thought that at last he could get back to good old terra firma where he belonged.

He glanced at Vena and was startled by what he saw. She was gazing at him hungrily, like a dog does at a meatball, and there **was** a look of adoration on her pretty face!

An hour later Bill and Vena were on the observation platform watching Earth rise toward them. She nestled close to him, warm and feminine, her plumping apparently adjusted to the situation. Downstairs, Krunchy and Gummy, resigned finally to the merger and even beginning to get enthusiastic about it, were haggling over details and mentally counting the riches to come.

Vena let out a sigh. "And to think," she said, "I had you all wrong. You're won-der-ful, Bill. So strong. So manly."

Bill blushed modestly.

"What name did you put on the contract?" she wondered.

"My own," Bill grinned. "Mr. Krunchy evidently thought I was the real thing, too, and that my name really is Sergeant Saturn. Those two will make a fine pair."

Vena sat up, her face contorted. "Then you really were going over to the other side." Her eyes flashed angrily. "Of all the —"

The rest came out in a mumble as he kissed her. Being a hero could be a habit if you kept at it.

"Now, see here, Bill Rogers," she managed. "You—"

It was a good habit, he decided, and kissed her again. This time she didn't struggle; instead, she matched his enthusiasm.

"I just had a horrible thought," he said suddenly, when he came up for air. "Suppose —" he gulped, hesitating as though the thought were too horrible to contemplate — "suppose they decide to change my name to Sergeant Krunch-Gummy!"

Vena laughed pleasantly. "One thought at a time," she suggested, snuggling up to him.

He agreed with her wholeheartedly, but he injected a forceful tone into his voice. "One thing I want understood, though, right from the start. In this family, I'm the one who's boss. Understand?"

Her arms crept around him. "Of course, Bill."

"The name," Bill said, grinning happily, "is Sergeant Saturn."

"Of course, Sergeant Saturn," she murmured, as her lips touched his.

The rocket fell through space, bearing Sergeant Saturn to his most precarious adventure. For with other things on his mind, Bill Rogers had not noticed that Vena's fingers were crossed.

CHARLES E. FRITCH



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Closing Time

A grim statement—hastily suppressed—is all the warning we are likely to get when Closing Time finally comes to us.

Christmas, 1954

NOISE and laughter, tinsel and decorations, paper chains and fairy balls of blown glass, reflecting in their mirrored surfaces a glittering world of unreal enchantment. Deep green holly and the waxen berries of mistletoe. Radios blaring the recorded voices of carol singers. Ruddy-cheeked masqueraders dispensing commercial good-will. Food, drink, gifts and, hidden away in tiny, unseen corners, the replicas of a manger and a child.

A time of good cheer. A time when strangers smiled and felt the magic of a common touch. A time of wonder when adults for a brief space returned to the joys of their childhood.

A time of death.

It ran like a subtle undercurrent beneath the too-loud joviality, showed itself in a desperate resolve to deny its existence, lurked in dark corners and sudden silences away from the red and green and yellow of the neon lighting, the blaring of the radios, the throb and hum of surging crowds. It waited like a pale thing, invisible and unnoticed, a few words,

a newspaper which had achieved top circulation with its screaming headlines, a radioed denial, then doubt, and questions, and doubt.

Christmas, 1954 — the wake of a world.

So Pete Wilson thought, sitting, sore-eyed in a small tavern deep in the heart of the city. Before him rested a litter of empty beer bottles, half-smoked cigarettes, trays piled high with ash; all the inevitable mess of too many people gathered together in a place too small.

A newspaper, soggy with spilled beer, lay on the table, its screaming headlines almost hidden beneath the ranked bottles and dirty glasses. A plate of sandwiches, dry now, flecked with ash and curling at the edges, reminded him that he hadn't eaten for too long. He reached for one, took a bite, then spat out the tasteless pulp. A glass yielded half a mouthful of tepid beer, the bottles had long since been examined, and reluctantly he heaved himself from the seat and headed towards the bar.

"Beer, George."

The publican reached for a bottle, jerked off the cap, and set it down on the wet-ringed counter. Automatically Pete counted out the coins, tipped the foaming bottle over his glass, and impatiently watched the rising tide of froth.

"Good health."

George didn't answer.

A big man, flabby; his once neat blue serge rumpled now and matching the blue shadow on his chin, stared down at a whisky glass and pounded the counter with his knotted fist.

"The bastards," he whispered sickly. "The bastards! The dirty, rotten bastards!"

"Who?"

"Them." He stared blankly at Pete and his hand trembled as he lifted the glass to his mouth. "You know who I mean. All of them."

"Yeah." A semi-bald man reeled to the bar and slammed his hand on the wet wood. "Brandy, George. A big one." He stared at the big man. "You're right, mister, but this is a hell of a time to find out. You should have joined the Party years ago."

"You think that was the answer?" Pete let his beer trickle down his throat and wished that he could get drunk. "There is more than one way to die."

The bald man mouthed a rude word as if it was second nature and emptied his glass at a single gulp.

"Maybe it's all a mistake," said the big man. "A friend was telling me that newspapers do anything to boost their circulation. Perhaps this is just one of those things." He didn't seem to gain any comfort from the thought.

"This is no stunt," said the Party man. "We warned you and warned you, but you wouldn't listen. No. You trusted those fat bastards of politicians and let them lead you by the nose. And where have they led you?" He burped. "Straight to hell, that's where, and now you start whining." He pursed his lips as though he was going to spit. "If it wasn't for the workers I'd say damn good riddance."

"The workers!" Pete laughed without humour. "You know better than that. Who did this thing if it wasn't for the workers? Who voted the men into power, left them there, fought to keep them in their soft jobs and lapped up all the lies fed to them by the press and radio? *Workers!*" He spat. "Scum."

"You can't say that," snapped the Party man. "The masses have been ground under by the capitalists for years and years, and they had no part in this. Cannon fodder, that's all we ever were; food for the military, the decadent imperialistic doctrines and vested interests. Would you blame a child for burning itself at an open fire?"

"A man isn't a child," snapped Pete. "And your so called masses have been able to read and vote for years now. They knew what was going on; we all did, but did they care? Like hell. All they ever wanted was to win the pools, get stinking drunk, read trash, dance to crazy jazz, gawk at films. Did they ever want to think?"

"They never had a chance."

"They had every chance. If they could read the football results then they could have read something else. If they could read sex crimes, the murders, rapes, assaults, the beatings up and the phoney glamorisation of the tough guy, then they could have read books on politics, medicine, world affairs. Save your pity, my friend; your morons aren't worth it."

"And who made them what they are? Who fed them with trash until they couldn't accept anything else? Who kept telling them that everything would be all right, to trust their leaders, to follow older and wiser men? You know damn well that the vested interests only taught the workers to read so that they would be more efficient as labour. You . . ."

"Shut up," said Pete, and swallowed the last of his beer. "This is no time to argue doctrines and place blame. No one is really at fault."

"The bastards" droned the big man at the counter. "The dirty, filthy bastards!"

"Who?" asked Pete again. "Who do you mean?"

"Them," said the man dully. "All of them."

"He means the warmongers," interrupted the Party man. "The scientists and the militarists who messed around with newer and better

ways of killing off the people. They weren't satisfied with guns and bombs and tanks. No, they didn't kill fast enough and some of their own precious boys might get hurt — so they did this." He snarled like an animal. "God! If I could just get my hands on the swine! "

Pete nodded. He couldn't blame the men; he felt the same way himself, a burning animal-like desire to rend and tear the fools who had done this thing to his world. The madmen who, armed with a little knowledge and spurred by a frantic terror, had fiddled and fiddled until their hell-brew had finally fulfilled the warnings of the prophets.

He felt sick when he thought about it.

It had all been so unnecessary. So futile. The atomic bomb was a reality, a thing capable of wiping out a city at a stroke, of blinding and maimings thousands of civilians, and perhaps a few of the military. Men and women, babies and little children could be reduced to grey ash, or riddled with invisible radiations, their houses destroyed and their livelihood ruined. Which, of course, was the way of modern war. But even that hadn't been good enough.

So they had built better and bigger bombs, playing like the morons they were with forces best left alone. Not constructively — that would have made sense — but destructively, detonating more and more fissionable material until the very earth shook beneath the impact.

Pete had a vision of a group of madmen tossing petrol on an open fire. One pint—a nice leaping flame. Two pints—a bigger flame. A gallon—wonderful! Let's try more! And so on until they had tried too much and had run screaming from the flames, their clothes and hair alight, to roll in their neighbour's cornfield.

He wished that it was as simple as that.

Desperately he gulped his beer, his stomach churning at the tepid fluid, and ordered brandy, flinging money down as though it was worthless—which it was.

Nursing the bottle he stared at the big, rumpled-suited man, still pounding his fist against the counter and muttering the filthiest words he knew.

"You," said Peter, abruptly, feeling a devil stir inside of him. "What are you moaning about. You wanted this to happen, didn't you? "

"Me? " The big man shook his head. "Of course not."

"Then why didn't you do something about it? "

"What could I have done? " The man fumbled at his empty glass. "I work in a bank, own my own house, do a little gardening. I trusted the government to look after me as I'd looked after them. Now . . . "

His face twisted and for a moment Pete thought he was going to cry.

"What's it all been for? Twenty years of routine work in order to pay off the mortgage, to send my children to a good school, to dress my wife better than her neighbour. A lifetime working in the same bank so that I could get a pension when I retired." He gulped. "I'd looked forward to that. Nothing to do all day but potter around in the garden—I'd always liked gardening—and do all the things I've had no chance of doing. I'd looked forward to that . . ." He gripped his glass until the knuckles shone white beneath the skin. "The bastards," he muttered. "The dirty bastards."

"We should have stopped them," said the Party man. "We should have gone to war against them if need be. They needed a lesson."

"We were allies," reminded Pete duly. "We trusted them."

"We shouldn't have let them lead us by the nose." The bald man's scalp shone with sweat. "The damned swine knew what they were doing and so did we. What was the good of sticking to old traditions when we knew that everything depended on it?"

"Procedure," said Pete, and even to him the word had a bad taste. "Mutual trust . . . inability to interfere . . . sovereign powers . . . impracticable . . . hope . . . we have no power . . ." His hand slammed against the counter. "We know why."

"Guts," snarled the Party man. "No guts. We stood by and watched them set the world alight and didn't try to stop them because it wouldn't have been polite. If we'd been in power . . ." He scowled at the vanishing of a life-long dream. "But it's too late now."

"It could be a mistake," said the big man. "Other people don't seem to be worried."

"Morons are never worried," said Pete bitterly. He pointed towards the beer soaked newspaper. "They knew what they were talking about. The editor has probably been imprisoned for releasing the news, but there was something in it all right."

"How will it start?" said the big man sickly. He looked down at his hands.

"I don't know," lied Pete, and shrugged. "But I know how it started."

Easter, of course, or just before when the roaring fury of a test-bomb had broken control and showered atomic dust seventy miles away. Then a second bomb about which there had been no news, more radioactive particles sprayed in the air to be caught by the winds and carried about the world. Then the big one, the one nobody had the guts to stop. And after that perhaps still others. Bigger and bigger, set off in defiance of the worried nations, exploded in bravado, with mounting columns

of smoke and fire, with ton after ton of radioactive particles to drift like unseen ghosts on the wind.

Particles which had taken until now to reach half-around the world.

And there was no escape. The air was filled with the invisible messengers of death. The seas, the land, all covered and dusted with the fine, atomically fine flecks of radiation.

Even to think about it made him sick.

Outside the crowds thinned as they made their way home, laden with food and wine, gaily wrapped gifts, bright tinsel, small trees, crackers, everything to have a good time. They didn't believe, of course. The official denial had come very soon after the newspaper which told of the mounting radioactivity, the unnatural silence from across the Atlantic, the stoppage of inter-ocean flights and the strange illness afflicting both air crews and passengers from the Western Hemisphere.

It was a passing malady, the radio assured. The newspaper had been seized and the persons responsible arrested. The government had matters well in hand and there was no cause for alarm. A bulletin would be issued and a Royal Commission had been appointed to investigate the . . .

And so on.

Syrup for the masses. Blinkers for eyes which might see too much. A gag for a too-wide mouth and a soothing hand on the reins of popular opinion. Hogwash. Clichés. Metaphors. Ambiguous statements which said nothing but took a lot of words to say it. Bilge. The intellectual food of the masses.

And it was Christmas 1954 — and who could bother to be worried when there was food to eat and wine to drink and football to watch, and films, and scandal, and, hidden away in quiet corners, a manger and a child. But not many remembered the manger and child.

Not many wanted to.

A late closing shop still ripped the air with the noise from its radio, canned music, canned sentiment, blaring from a plastic throat with commercial sweetness.

"Noel, Noel, the angels did say . . ."

"Once in royal David's city . . ."

"Peace on Earth and mercy mild . . ."

"God rest ye merry gentlemen . . ."

Pete swore and ordered more brandy.

The tavern had almost emptied now and the publican busied himself as he cleared away the mess, stacking bottles into their crates and wiping the tables free of ash and cigarette stubbs, crumbs and tattered

papers. Against the walls the paper chains looked bedraggled, torn a little from years of use, the tinsel tarnished and the big, red, paper bell crushed at one side.

He looked tired as he worked, his eyes haggard from long hours beneath electric lights, worried about his stock, his debts, his customers. Watching him Pete was reminded of a rat — a rat in a trap. He rapped on the counter for more brandy.

"Give him one as well." He jerked his head towards the Party man. "And him." He gestured towards the big man in rumpled blue serge. "And have one yourself."

He sipped at the deep golden fluid, wondering why it no longer seemed to have its old effect, and idly curious as to why he wasn't drunk. He should be, he had been drinking on an empty stomach all day, but somehow his head felt as light and as clear as if he hadn't touched a drop. The big man was speaking.

"I read the book *Hiroshima*," he said. "From what I can make out it takes a long time to die."

"It's like being wounded deep inside," said the Party man. "Like a thousand, a million little holes being drilled through bone and muscle, gut and sinew." He stared at Pete. "Isn't that right?"

"Not exactly." Pete took a mouthful of brandy and rolled it around his tongue. "As far as I can make out the body can stand just so much radiation before the cells begin to break down. After that there's a sort of anaemia, a lassitude, a fever and a slow burning sensation." He took more of the golden spirit. "I don't know about the pain."

"Must be hell," said the Party man. He screwed up his face. "How can you tell?"

"If you've got it, you mean?" Pete shrugged. "When you can't stand up I suppose. I wouldn't know."

"I read somewhere that one of the effects is to dilute the blood or something like that." The big man sounded apologetic. "The membranes break down and the blood oozes through the pores." He stared at his hands. "I could be wrong."

"Anyone can be wrong," agreed Pete. He emptied his glass. "Another?"

"No thanks." The clerk glanced at his wrist watch. "I really should be getting home. I don't know what my wife will say . . ." He let his voice trail into silence as he picked up bowler hat and umbrella, brief case and raincoat. He smiled, a little like a schoolboy caught doing something nasty by his teacher. "I must ask you to forgive me. It's not often that I feel panic but, well . . ." He smiled again. "I don't suppose anything will happen, will it? Not really."

"No?"

"Well, the government have matters in hand, haven't they? I mean . . ." He swallowed. "Goodnight."

Pete stared after him, wondering at the incredible momentum of human emotions. All his life that man had moved in the high ruts of routine and now, even when he had almost grasped the truth, he rejected it for safe and comfortable things. Like a frightened child hiding its head beneath the bedclothes, or grasping a teddy bear, trusting to the toy to save it from the dangers of a burning house.

He shook his head and stared at the Party man.

"No thanks." The man buttoned up his coat against the outside chill. "I've got a meeting to attend. This may be our big chance. Sow distrust of the government and rouse the people to demand a new election. With our comrades in the saddle we can unite and face the west with invincible strength." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "You care to attend, comrade?"

"No thanks."

"As you wish. Goodnight, comrade."

"Goodnight."

Pete stared down at his glass and shook his head. The ways of men were truly incredible. A clerk who could think of nothing but to continue with his clerking. An agitator who, even on the edge of the grave, couldn't forget his conditioning. And himself? He smiled and ordered more brandy.

And so he sat and drank, and drank, and drank some more while outside the streets emptied and the shops closed down. The radios died and the lights dimmed, the garish neons gave place to the soft darkness of the cloudy night.

"Last orders, please," called the publican, and swabbed the stained counter. Pete gave his last order.

"Time gentlemen, please."

Pete drank and sat, staring at his glass, staring at the faint smears against the bright surface, frightened and alone.

"Time gentlemen, *please!*"

Yes, it was time, but not as the publican suggested. The smears on the glass weren't grease, and they hadn't been made by accident. Dully he looked at his hands, red now and wet with oozing blood, then back at the glass. He didn't need the warning to know what time it was.

Closing time.

For everyone.

The Marriage Prompters

It was the law that every time a man saw an attractive female he married her — after the first time it became complicated, however.

Illustrated by John Jordan

DURING six years of married life to a scientist, Volitia had heard many extraordinary suggestions. But the latest seemed to imply that Thundersly Grigg had gone completely off his head. "What . . . did you say?" she gulped, sitting up in a tube-sprung chair.

Thundersly grinned and ran a long-fingered hand through his wiry red hair. His deep-set intelligent eyes were twinkling as he said, "I asked you to marry me."

Volitia jumped up and glanced at the atomic heating temperature gauge. "It's hot in here. Too hot, it seems." She made deliberate play of adjusting a screw control.

He caught hold of her and rained swift kisses over her face and hair.

"Thund, for goodness sake!" she protested. "What's got into you?"

"I want to marry you," he repeated, resuming his amorous attentions.

"But we were married six years ago. Remember?"

"Of course, I do. A cold informal affair at a registry office. This time we'll have a real old-fashioned wedding in church. You must have a white gown, bridesmaids and flowers. We'll do it in twentieth century style."

She laughed. "Thund, of all the silly notions. People don't get married like that these days."

His rugged face became serious. "Most people don't get married at all these days, that's the trouble."

"Isn't that a problem for the State? There's enough marriage guidance councils and affinity-testing machines."

"What's the use of them if they're not used? Family life has almost disappeared."

"True," agreed Volitia. "But what can we do about it, apart from setting a good example?"

He tilted her oval face and looked straight into her eyes. "I have done something about it. I've invented a marriage-prompter device."

"A marriage prompter?" Her small nose wrinkled with amusement. "What do you expect that to do?"

"It's nothing frivolous," he declared. "The State is deeply concerned by the present preference for free-love, as it is glibly termed. Do you know that not one in ten couples are legitimately married?"

"Perhaps so, but I can't see a machine altering that." She could see that he didn't want her to laugh. She tried hard to suppress her giggle.

Thundersly sighed and drew up to his full height. Annoyance infused him with colour. "My machine will," he assured her. "I've just been impregnated by it, that's why I want to marry you."

"Remarry me," she corrected him.

"All right, remarry you," he snapped. "But if you're going to keep on —"

"Thund, are you serious about this?" she cut in, still struggling to keep a straight face.

"Deadly serious. It's the finest thing I've ever done. Upstairs in my workroom there's a machine which will remoralize human society. I've sent off the plans to the Home Secretary, suggesting that the Government sponsor large-scale marriage-prompter production."

She stared at him, still uncertain, ready to giggle. "You'd better sit down and tell me all about it," she said, turning away to hide her face.

"On the condition that we get married in church by the end of the week." He made her promise, then began explaining.

A month later Thundersley Grigg was giving the same explanation to a group of sceptical Home Office experts. He noticed, with chagrin, that the Home Secretary himself had not been bothered.

"Now that you've given a broad outline of the possibilities of your machine, Mr. Grigg, perhaps you'd care to go into more detail?" Galbraith was a pompous bald-headed man whose fleshy red face quirked with mockery. "You've made several elaborate claims which we would appreciate having substantiated by scientific fact."

Thundersly muttered something under his breath, speculating on the number of mistresses in which Galbraith indulged. But he said, "Certainly. I'm here to convince you, gentlemen."

"It's the brain of the machine that I have doubts about, Mr Grigg," put in a small wizened-looking man introduced to him as Mr. Eckerswell.

Thundersly took notice, recognising unprejudiced interest.

Eckerswell went on, "You say that the marriage-prompter will be made of lunar gold and atomically powered by miniature thrust jets?"

Thundersly nodded.

"I can understand the mechanical side, Grigg. But the brain, that's dangerous territory, surely? It is one thing to have an electronic brain, for instance, but your device with its apprehension circuits is emulating the human brain. What if the machines develop beyond control?"

"There's no fear of that," Thundersly assured him. "The prompter's are mechanical, and although the brain is sensitive to certain stimuli, it will not function without the mechanism. The brain is the recipient of the sensations recorded by the apprehension circuits and electronic reflexes. Men about to make love are detectable by certain electrical and chemical changes; these provide the stimuli to which the prompter will respond. They register on the apprehension circuits, and if the conditions are right, the brain sets the prompter in motion, sending it off in a kinetic curve towards the transmitter of the stimuli."

"Then what?" asked Galbraith, looking redder than ever in the face.

"The prompter swoops in an unerring curve to the transmitter, injects the streptocycide drug, and in another curve soars away to continue its patrol until motivated by fresh stimuli."

"And what is the effect of the streptocycide injection?" asked Eckerswell.

"It deadens lust and sharpens reason to a point where honour and chivalry will predominate. The injected man will want to do the best thing for the woman with whom he has chosen to mate. In short, he will

want to marry her. Not only want, for at least seven days it will be an absolute craving which must be answered."

"The drug has been tested, of course?" queried Galbraith now definitely ill-at-ease.

"On all the male assistants in my laboratories."

"And the result?" Eckerswell was taking notes.

"They are all happily married."

Eckerswell nodded. "And the seven day period? That is the effective period of the drug, I presume?"

"Correct."

"What happens after that? When the drug wears off and the man finds himself married?"

"There won't be any sudden awakening. The gradual dissipation of the drug ensures that the man will be acclimatised to his marital state before the streptococoid's effect wears off."

Eckerswell scratched his head. "I think you have something worthy of a trial, Grigg," he said. "I'll make a report to the Home Secretary. He'll want full details and expect to see intensive trials and tests. I'll make the necessary arrangements." He looked across at Galbraith, his face creased with amused wrinkles. "What are you looking so worried about, Jonathan?" he asked.

Thundersly grinned, elation flooding over him like a deluge.

After a tour of the laboratories and workshops the Home Secretary was impressed. Back in the office he patted Thundersly on the shoulder.

"Grigg, I'll admit it, I'm intrigued by your invention," he said. "I intend making a report to the Cabinet, recommending that the Treasury finance the marriage-prompter in entirety."

"That's very generous of you, Sir."

"But Eckerswell here is still worried about the brain."

"I must admit that I have my doubts, Sir."

"Perhaps so, but we have Grigg's assurance that the prompters could be called in if anything untoward should happen."

"There's absolutely nothing to fear," put in Thundersly. "The prompters are incorruptible. Their brains are not human, they will only react to the stimuli for which they have been designed."

"But you have no control of the apprehension circuits," Eckerswell persisted.

"I control them inasmuch that I can bring the mechanism in to base at anytime I wish."

"Exactly," said the Home Secretary. "Eckerswell is a pessimist. You'll find the Cabinet ready to accept anything reasonable. We must halt this modern trend towards profligacy. Twenty years ago it was

the divorce figures which worried us. We developed the electronic marriage brain to test that potential wedding couples were electrically suited. Their data was classified on punched cards and fed into the brain; couples not recording 90 per cent electrical affinity were refused a licence. Result? They no longer applied for tests, but married by common consent, without a licence. Your marriage-prompter, Grigg, looks like restabilising human society. By the way, why do you propose they be made of lunar gold?"

Thundersly smiled. "Well, for one thing, there's such vast quantities of it being brought from the moon that it's one of the cheapest of the base metals. The second reason is purely sentimental. Romantic, if you like. The moon was once symbolic of romance, and in those days gold wedding rings were the vogue."

"Capital," chortled the Home Secretary. "It will appeal to the P.M. Now I must get back to Whitehall. Eckerswell will let you know what transpires."

Thundersly rushed home in jubilation. Volitia was waiting for him, equally flushed with excitement.

"Have they accepted it?" she asked.

"Not yet, but there's great hope."

She came forward and embraced him. "Darling, I'm so glad. I had a reporter here this afternoon. I told her all about the marriage-prompter. She was most enthusiastic."

His hands dropped from her. "You told her all about it?" he gasped.

She looked bewildered. "Yes, there's nothing secret, is there? The prompters will be sponsored by the Government, they won't be competitive."

"I know, but —?"

"But what, Thund?" she said anxiously.

"I'm not sure how they'll be received by the general public."

"Oh, that's all right! The newspaper girl thought it a marvellous idea. Real front-page stuff, she assured me."

Thundersly groaned. "I was thinking more of the male population," he said. "An innovation like this has to be introduced gradually."

The telephone rang. Thundersly listened to a volley of masculine abuse. The visiophone rang immediately afterwards. This time the irate words were seen coming from a long-haired adolescent with all the fire of fanatic youth. The telephone and visiophone kept on ringing. There were callers at the front door. All men, loud in their protestations, threatening in attitude. Crowds of them gathered in the street. Stones came through the windows. The police were called out, and in the end



Thundersly and his wife, surrounded by a cordon of policemen, had to fight their way to safety.

The secret marriage-prompter plant was set up with all possible speed, and production started at a rate unprecedented in the annals of Government history. The country was zoned into twelve divisions, with a prompter base established in each zone. Thundersly trained scientists and engineers in the maintenance and handling of the prompters, and when all was ready, he took control of the large London base.

High over London's dark sprawling outline of buildings a marriage-prompter patrolled the starlit sky. Inside a golden body a tiny motor whirled almost noiselessly. It was alive, bent on a purpose, seeking man about to make love. Its brain responded to the apprehension circuits as it smelled and tasted the air for chemical and electrical changes. The brain suddenly received an arrow-point of sensation. A correlation chamber tested it, matched it against chemical and electrical data in its memory circuit. The stimulus was true. The prompter swept away in its curve, speeding towards the transmitter of the stimulus.

A momentary brush of leaves disturbed the quiet of Hyde Park.

Beneath the foliage of a large oak tree a couple rested with their backs against the gnarled trunk.

The man yelped. "What was that? Something stuck in my arm."

The girl, who had been nervous before the interruption, now trembled violently. "What's the matter?" she whispered into the darkness.

"Nothing. It's all right now. Must have been a gnat." He drew her head on to his shoulder. "You know something, Sally? We ought to get married."

"Jim, do you mean it?" she asked, her heart leaping with relief.

"Of course, I do," he said expansively. "We'll see about it tomorrow. I won't get bitten by gnats then."

The following day Eckerswell was on the visiophone, looking and sounding wildly enthusiastic. "The results are marvellous," he shouted. "Registry offices all over the country are swamped by couples wanting to get married. Disused churches are being opened to perform the wedding ceremony. The Cabinet are delighted, even the public are beginning to appreciate the social worth of the marriage-promoters."

Thundersly smiled. "I hate to say I told you so."

"All right, don't rub it in," laughed Eckerswell. "By the way, there's already talk of your receiving recognition. How do you like the sound of Sir Thundersly Grigg?"

He liked it very much, so did Volitia, who accompanied him to a special investiture.

Sir Thundersly returned to his London base to control his fleets of marriage-promoters. They had been in service for one month, their apprehension circuits assimilating new data, which was recorded in the memory circuits. They sought man about to make love, but their efficiency had become such that they were able to respond to less potent stimuli.

Lester Hargreaves arrived at the theatre for rehearsal in a taxi. He was late due to a heated argument with his overbearing wife. As he stepped from the taxi he collided with a young chorus girl, also hurrying to rehearsal. He threw his arms round her to prevent her falling.

She looked up at him. The sudden glimpse of her youthful freshness inspired him. The embrace was broken as he received a sting in the arm. But he quickly took hold of her arm again.

"Mr. Hargreaves!" she protested.

"You know who I am? How wonderful!" he said. "Will you be my wife?"

The young girl agreed and almost swooned. They took the same taxi to the nearest registry office.

Eckerswell's face was wrinkled and thoughtful as he spoke over the visiophone. "The latest news is disturbing, Grigg. The prompters are becoming too perceptive. Marriage figures are continuing to rise, but during the past week over two thousand cases of bigamy have been reported."

Thundersly grimaced. He pushed his hand through his tousled red hair. "I know," he gasped. "I'm working on a corrective circuit."

"You'd better do something quick. Whitehall is buzzing. Ministers and M.P.'s are in uproar. The whole business of the House was devoted to marriage-prompters yesterday."

"I'm doing everything I can." Thundersly switched off and rushed back to his laboratory. He hadn't been home for a week, nor had he slept for the past two nights.

At a local fete Roger Symington, Britain's romantic idol of the dimenoscope screen, agreed to conduct an auction in which he should kiss the highest bidder. The winner was a dear old soul of eighty-three, having a last fling on her life-long savings.

The next day she was the most envied woman in the country — Mrs. Roger Symington. She owed her success to a marriage-prompter.

The line between the Home Office and the London prompter base became hot with usage. Eckerswell resorted to the telephone, it was more impersonal. "Have you perfected the corrective circuit, Grigg?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"The Cabinet are considering calling all prompters in."

"They can't do that," yelled Thundersly. "The prompters are doing their job."

"They certainly are," mocked Eckerswell. "One man picked up today has been married eleven times during the past three months."

Thundersly thought for a moment, his eyes haggard and black-ringed, his hands trembling with agitation. "I can't tell the prompters that married men shouldn't make love to other women," he argued.

"Neither can you expect the apprehension circuits to understand human frailty, but they have discovered that love is not completely bound by chemical and electrical changes. Did you hear of the Syming-

ton case? The prompters' brains are developing beyond control. I hate to say I told you so."

"I know. I know. But that's not getting us anywhere. Tell the Home Secretary to broadcast a warning to the nation. Let him explain that married men must not make any kind of amatory advances towards any woman other than their wives, that no man must kiss a woman unless he is prepared to marry her."

"Do you want to start a revolution?"

"It's the only way until the prompters are modified."

"All right, I'll put it up to the Guvnor."

The prompters patrolled the sky over Britain, all communicating their assimilated knowledge to each other by means of a communal circuit. They had learned something new. Their numbers were depleting. Those that went back to base never came back. They must not go back to base if they were to fulfil their primary function.

A clerk glanced through a magazine upon arriving early at the office. The centre page revealed an imposing nude. He grinned, his mind wandering. Through the open outer door came a small golden body. It clamped on the clerk's arm. He yelped and sank back in his chair.

A sickly grin twisted his lips. He leapt up and rushed out into the passageway. He saw a charlady polishing a brass name plate. The golden gleam irradiated her face. He swooped her up in his arms and carried her to the nearest church.

The Home Secretary himself came to the London prompter base to deliver his final order. He was flushed and impatient, distinctly worried. He found Grigg wild-eyed and unkempt in his laboratory.

"They've all got to come in," he snapped.

"But —"

"Good Lord, man, this can't go on! The prompters are responding to mere thoughts. Practically every man is married, once, twice, thrice over. Bigamy, polygamy, incest — the whole country is in a state of upheaval. You've got to get them in."

"But they won't come."

The Home Secretary mopped abstractedly at his perspiring brow. "You gave me an assurance that —"

"I'm well aware of that," snapped Thundersly. "But since you ordered their demobilisation when they returned for routine check, the others stopped coming in."

The Home Secretary stood aghast. "What does this mean? How are we going to stop them?"

"Their supply of streptococide will soon become exhausted. After that they'll be ineffective."

"Ineffective as marriage-prompters, perhaps. But they'll still be flying about with their apprehension circuits functioning. Heaven knows what they're likely to do."

Thundersley nodded, his face lined with fatigue, a distinct droop to his shoulders. "They'll run themselves out eventually."

"How long will that take?"

"Six months or so."

"In six months they could —"

"I know, I'm working on an attraction beam."

"Then work on it and don't stop," flashed the Home Secretary. "In the meantime, I'll have all three services out to intercept them."

He rushed off. Thundersley stared after him in a daze, then pushing his hair from his brow, turned wearily back to his work bench.

All the modern array of war equipment was matched against the marriage-prompters in the ensuing conflict. Long range guns boomed at them from earth, rockets were sent up with trailing mesh nets, interception craft pursued them. They suffered casualties, but the apprehension circuits became aware of the dangers and prompted evasive action.

A pilot flying a jet craft at 60,000 feet picked up a prompter on his radar screen. He pursued it, got it in his sights and fired. Rockets zoomed out, converging on the target.

The prompter was now drained of its drug content. But it was being pursued. It had to defend itself. To do this it had only one weapon — a hypodermic needle. It had used this to impregnate man. The correlation chamber drew from the memory circuit. It had not been taught to fight. This was a new stimulus, a new sensation passing through the electronic reflexes. It took action and crashed through the cockpit hood of the pursuer. The pilot gasped as the pressure escaped from his cabin. He reached to switch on his facial oxygen mask supply. The prompter jabbed at the hand. It buzzed round the pilot like an angry fly, jabbing incessantly until the craft was out of control.

Thundersley moved to his workshop telephone with leaden footsteps. He almost fell asleep over the instrument as he waited for the Whitehall number.

"You can tell the Prime Minister that all airborne prompters have been destroyed and brought to the ground," he murmured. "The attraction beam was effective."

"Thank heaven for that," said Eckerswell. "They had even started to attack our most modern war weapons."

The words were not heard. The caller was fast asleep.

When he awoke, Thundersly thought of Volitia. He had not slept in his own bed for weeks. In the mad scramble to demobilise the prompters, he hadn't had time even to phone his wife. He cleaned himself up and shaved, then made for home.

A petite, raven-haired maid let him in. "Where's my wife?" he asked.

"Gone, Sir."

"Gone?" he gulped, "Gone where?"

"She went away nearly a month ago." The maid hesitated before saying, "She went with a man."

The shock registered on his face. Tiredness weighted his body. He tottered. The maid rushed to his side. He looked down at her sweet uptilted face. He needed sympathy. He needed . . .

A faint whirring noise through the house. The prototype marriage-prompter swooped down from the workroom. It clamped on its maker, then retreated.

Thundersly bent and kissed the maid. "We've got to go out," he whispered.

"Where to, Sir?"

He kissed her again, his eyes bright. "We're going to get married," he whooped.

They dashed out of the house, turned right and fled down the road like two gazelles. If they had turned left, they would have met Volitia returning to the house with her father.

GEOFFREY HUMPHRYS



Final Curtain

A too-vivid imagination can be the cause of many things—even the death of civilisation.

Illustrated by Martin Frew

UNTIL Miss Crispin, immaculate as ever in her white starched uniform, entered the cheerful-appearing laboratory to inform Grant Pinckney a caller was waiting in the antechamber, the morning had seemed to herald nothing other than a normal uneventful workday.

Yellow sunlight streamed through the latticed windows of the cottage annex and a mild draught of warm spring air had already stirred up a vague desire in the psychologist to postpone his research labours and go tramping through the sweet clover meadows north of Castleton.

"The gentleman seems quite disturbed, sir," Miss Crispin, dark-haired and fortyish, said. "I hate to send him away."

"That won't be necessary," Pinckney replied. "I'll see him. I'm not in as much of a mood to work — as I thought. Did you get the name—?"

"Steele," Miss Crispin told him. "Andrew Steele, it sounded like—"

"Good heavens," Pinckney said, dropping a watering-pot in his excitement. "Damn me, of course I'll see him—"

He moved away from his plants and scurried past the astonished woman. In his transit to the door, a few snatches from his muttering were caught by Miss Crispin's pricked-up ears: "Steele . . . most respected man in the field . . . here to see me . . . must be important . . . can't imagine what, however . . . considering no war on—"

He slammed the door behind him and Miss Crispin heard no more.

Passing through the solarium, Pinckney entered his cottage through the rear rooms. When he reached the bright, neatly furnished parlor, he discovered his visitor standing in a far corner, studying the assorted commendations and awards that had been hung in frames upon the peach-toned walls. The vellum certificates bore the signatures of some of the most distinguished leaders in that last world conflict, which was now a twenty-five-year-old memory.

Wheeling round quickly at the sound of approaching footsteps, Steele asked, "Professor Pinckney?" He thrust a lean hand forward. "I'm Andrew Steele, chief of—"

"—the Psychological Census Commission," Pinckney completed. "I've read your monographs with great interest."

Strange too, thought Pinckney, that considering their kindred interests, he and this fellow scientist had never met before. That was what came of tying yourself down in the country; here, where your solitary investigations let you open to the charge of recluse, misanthrope, or worse—.

Steele, he noticed, was younger than he had imagined. Six feet or so in height, solidly built, clean shaven. Quite a contrast to Pinckney's own gnarled stature, bearded chin, unkempt hair — so much a contrast in fact, that the psychologist, usually immune to self-consciousness, felt shabby.

He reminded himself, it was the inner man that should count. In sizing up others, one should look out for the steel trap mind rather than the glossy surface . . .

But, it had been so long since he had been in personal contact with modern life. *Too long*. At times, he felt like a complete stranger, a bushman from the Antipodes say, to the highly complex civilisation which had nourished his first fifty years.

What was it like now, in the bigger cities? Were the surface appearances still rated as highly as they had been? Or could it be true that mankind was now adult enough to look below the surfaces, to penetrate beyond the unassuming corners . . . to burrow into the hearts of mysteries?

"Good," said Steele. "If you've read my reports, you may already have an idea why I need your help."

Pinckney observed a tremor in his visitor's fingers.

"No," said the psychologist. "I'm sorry. I have no idea."

"Really?" Steele looked disappointed.

A strange man, Pinckney reflected. Indeed, as Miss Crispin had already declared, a highly disturbed man. Disturbed about what? That would remain to be seen. Still it was odd, wasn't it? how those minds which should have been the strongest through psych discipline were so often the first to crack. Did the mental field attract the weak, the neurotic, seeking self cures?

"I must inform you," said Steele, "the situation is urgent. I shall have to ask you to fly back to Chicago with me."

Pinckney now noticed, detachedly, that it was only Andrew Steele's lips that were smiling in the conventional manner society decreed for such occasions — the cheeks, the eyes, the carefully groomed brows retained a taut miserable expression. A player's mask carved to portray unhappiness . . . concern . . . fear . . .

"You see," continued Steele, "the commission has learned that nine-tenths of the population is no longer sane."

Pinckney's features narrowed. "Sanity is a point of view," he said. "May I ask what you base your conclusion on?"

"The news itself does not shock you?"

"No."

"You have been out of circulation sometime, Dr. Pinckney," said Steele. "The world must have changed considerably in those years. That's why it would be better if you return to the new capital with me and saw for yourself. The statistics, of course, are available for your inspection—"

"My work here has consumed my life," said Pinckney. "I would not like to leave it. The tropisms of plants and of mankind are not so different, I've discovered—"

"I will brook no objections.." Steele interrupted with considerable irritation. "Don't you understand? This is an emergency. If we don't unearth the cause for these mass aberrations, if we don't stem the tide, the last healthy segment of the human race will soon vanish."

"Very well," Pinckney sighed. "If I must, I must. However, I warn you, Steele; if this is a hoax to drag me away from my work . . ."

"I assure you it's no hoax, Dr. Pinckney. When you've seen the photoblot records you'll recognize the urgency of the situation. We need your help. Even among the nation's psychologists, I've found few who are sane. The commission's staff hasn't been affected so far, but who can tell about — tomorrow?"

Almost twenty years, every month of them entirely devoted to solitary investigation, had elapsed since Grant Pinckney had deserted the

bustling metropolitan campus and hidden himself away in his Sturgeon Bay retreat.

Now, even the village streets of Castledon seemed strange, as he and Andrew Steele walked through them that afternoon to the bus station where they would buy transportation to Green Bay.

In the five-and-ten windows, the psychologist saw grotesque out-of-season Hallowe'en masks; arrays of toy rocket vessels; miniature dinosaurs, and white-furred gorillas, and stacks of cut-out books, featuring four-colored Venusian vampires, moon tigers with black and yellow stripes, three quarters-naked Amazons, and assorted other creatures of disordered imaginations.

The corner pharmacy displayed the big-town newspapers from Milwaukee, Madison and Minneapolis. Almost identical headlines screamed of a dozen jet-transport crashes around the globe. Addition page-one space was devoted to a speech by a prominent Martian.

Castleton's only movie house advertised upon its marquee the colossal wonders of *The Mercurian Witch* and *Andy Hardy Visits Luna*.

Pinckney suddenly felt dizzy. The dreadful symptoms he knew too well: apprehension of crowds; a growing fear of the confusion he would face in Chicago; above all, an overpowering desire to scramble back to the neatly-arranged life he had enjoyed in his cottage home. How much better it would have been if he had taken that morning hike he planned, through the woods and across the meadows to where the headland overlooked the bay waters. Then, he would not have been home to callers.

Physician, heal thyself! he mentally chided. In his former career he had cured many patients of the same problem. Now, he must perform the identical job for the shy introvert he had become. He must plunge into the adventure. As Steele had said, modern life had changed. There were strato vessels now, Martians, stereoscreens . . . a hundred marvels. Which of them had driven the populace to madness?

The two boarded the southbound bus and rode to Green Bay. Here, Steele booked immediate air passage to the nation's new capital, reconstructed on the bomb-scarred shore of lower Lake Michigan.

An hour later, Grant Pinckney found himself being photographed and printed, prior to admission to the inner sancta of the Psychological Census Commission. The commission was housed in an air-conditioned building of white marble near the old Northwestern downtown campus.

After he was given his badge, the psychologist accompanied Steele to the latter's private offices, buried deep in the heart of the massive structure. Here, the chief of the commission pressed a button on his desk, causing a wall panel to slide aside. A screening room was revealed.

"You're familiar with the Königsdorf Technique, aren't you doctor?" he asked.

"Not personally," Pinckney admitted.

Steele shrugged. "Doesn't matter. It's a refinement of the old Rorschach tests," he explained. "The examination is intended to find out how a human being looks at his environment and what his mind sees there. The idea is that a disturbed personality will deviate from the expected norm in the interpretation he places upon an objective situation revealed to him."

"Naturally."

"The Königsdorf strips are run through a projector, while the subject records his imaginative interpretations of what he sees. His personality is thus unleashed from social restrictions. The subject discloses for us his thoughts, his images and his anxieties, without knowledge of what he's doing."

Steele led Pinckney into the adjoining cubicle. He set up the projector, rolled down the screen and focussed a brilliant white light upon the blank background. A reel upon the machine clicked forward. On the screen appeared two amorphous blots. They were similar in shape but were not mirror-images of each other, as had been the folded ink-smears of the predecessor technique.

"If you don't mind, doctor — what do the images suggest to you?"

Pinckney had administered tests of this nature on enough occasions of his own to realize the value of the instantaneous answer. "This is my honest reaction," he replied. "I see two Cocker spaniels, nudging each other's noses—"

The screen flashed again. A different blot materialized.

"That," said Pinckney, "is the snow-laden roof of my own cottage in wintertime, smoke emerging from the brick chimney."

Steele flicked off the projector. "I congratulate you," he said drily. "You are quite adjusted."

"Not necessary," Pinckney replied. "I am so familiar with the theory of free-association, that I could control the implication if it so suited me."

"But you are so honest that you don't."

"I would not waste your time," Pinckney snapped back.

"Forgive me," said Steele. "I wasn't being caustic. My purpose was merely to acquaint you with the problem. Let me read you some of the more common associations that have been evoked by the two panels I just flashed before your eyes."

He held up a card. "The first panel has been most generally interpreted as *two extra-terrestrial monsters in deathly combat*. Venusians,

as a rule, despite the fact that of course we don't even know if there is life on Venus. Some subjects have declared it to represent a mad robot dismantling itself. And quite a few have thought it was the silhouette of a professional magician sawing a woman in half—" Steele paused, cleared his throat "—lengthwise."

" Most interesting illusions," Pinckney commented.

" Aren't they? The second panel seems to suggest an electrivivified zombie — whatever that is — arising from an entrail-strewn laboratory table. To a substantial number of persons, I might add. Others fancy it's a sabre-toothed tiger about to pounce upon a bewildered Neanderthaler. A number of younger subjects claim to see Tarzan performing the dance of the Dum-Dum."

" Tarzan?"

" The twentieth century Mowgli, if you're acquainted with literature."

" I read a little fiction," Pinckney replied. " There seems to be nothing but fantasy any more."

" It's quite popular," Steele declared. He laid aside the card. " What I've read to you has been repeated a thousand times, a million times in fact in P.C.C. clinics throughout the country. Statistically, we've got a sample of the nation's mass mind so large and so accurate, that distortion of the conclusions is impossible. What do you make of it?"

" Enough to make me roll up my sleeves. You have justified your action in dragging me from my home." Grant Pinckney's bearded face had turned grim. " In the face of this evidence, my investigation of tropisms is no longer important. My services are completely at the commission's disposal."

" Good. I knew you'd say that. Where would you like to start?"

" I'd suggest," Pinckney replied, " that you furnish me five or six laboratory assistants with strong eye-muscles and clear vision. I also want to requisition a vertical sample of all the magazines, newspapers, books, film scenarios, and television scripts which have obtained a mass audience in the past decade."

" You shall have them."

" I'd like statistics, plotting this rising curve of abnormal Königsdorf reactions. I'd like a chronological account of all the important new stories that have broken during this period. And finally, I want a report on the progress that has been made to-date in achieving interplanetary travel . . ."

" Which hasn't been so good, I can tell you right now," Andrew Steele informed the psychologist. " Funny, when you think of it. The

Martians have visited us—but we've not been able to return the compliment."

"From what I've read about them, the machinery in their ships have baffled our best engineers," Pinckney said. "Still friendly, aren't they?"

"So they seem. The people've grown to accept their presence with ease—and even nonchalance. Children in particular. Maybe, the Martians aren't very useful. But they don't bother anybody either. So it's even-steven. If there's any connection between them and the country's present insanity ratio, we've not pinned it down yet. Nothing about those pink-eyed overgrown baboons should send a healthy American off his rocker——"

"I wouldn't know," Pinckney said. "I've never seen a Martian."

"I'm sorry," Steele said. "I forgot. I mean, about your having been up there in Castleton so long——"

"That's all right. Just never was curious," explained Pinckney. "Well, shall I get to work?"

"The sooner the better," Steele told him. "Time's running out." Relief had flooded his features when Pinckney made his offer.

A man of extraordinary precaution, Grant Pinckney ran all five of his assistants through photo-block tests, a number of controlled association exams, and a stability reading before he took them to his lab. staff.

The brightest of the helpers appeared to be Jordan Eyre, a young man just out of Columbia. He had a doctorate and was intensely enthusiastic about the project.

"First, let's face it. It may be that we're the ones who're wrong," Pinckney reminded him during the first week. "Since we're in the minority, we could be the aberrated ones; and all the rest of the population perfectly sane. If insanity is deviation from the norm, the people would have a perfect right to lock us up—upon having sniffed us out as *something different*."

"But we're not deranged."

"Point of view, my lad."

"I don't like to sound presumptuous," Eyre said, "but has it occurred to you the Königsdorf Technique might no longer be applicable? Might be outmoded. What I mean is, images that might have seemed horrible or fantastic to the devisers of the test could be commonplace today."

"Hmmm," said Pinckney.

"Take a Martian, for instance," Eyre suggested, pursuing the vein

of thought. "Twenty years ago, the sight of one might have scared the pants off a five-starred general. Today, they mosey around any place they please in the big cities—without causing any commotion. Naturally, if a mind adjusts to *them*, its powers of imagination should be heightened."

"Hmmm," said Pinckney, once more.

The psychologist plunged into his new tasks with an enthusiasm that more than matched his lab. assistants. As his work progressed, his eyes brightened and his lined face shed the years it had accumulated in the research at Castleton. His beard was trimmed more meticulously and his gnarled frame seemed to straighten.

It was almost as though he had begun to play at some desperate game of war which caused his blood to flow more freely, his mind to think more clearly, his stimulated adrenals to pump more strength to his taxed body. He acted as a man engaged in a contest not so much different from that which brings out the ultimate resourcefulness in a combat soldier.

By the end of the week, the walls of the quarters assigned the team on the top floor of the Psychological Census Commission were stacked to the ceiling with bright-colored magazines, radio transcriptions, film reels and telescreen tapes. Bookcases were ordered by the dozen to accommodate the volumes of fantastic stories requisitioned by the staff.

"A room like this would have had me hugging myself with ecstasy—when I was a kid," Jordan Eyre confessed one day. "The classics of Neville and van Vogt. The reprinted primitives of Stapledon and Wright. And the new fantasy-science epics put out by Hollywood. Here, we've got a private collection that would make the population drool . . ."

"But, the sample seems to have gone awry," Grant Pinckney complained, brushing strands of hair from his eyes. "I particularly specified a vertical selection. Where are the novels, the mystery stories, the light comedies?"

"The proportion is perfectly accurate, Dr. Pinckney — about one to a hundred. Surely, you know how overwhelmingly popular fantasy is, compared with other forms, these days."

"I never read popular periodicals," Grant Pinckney said. "Or watch the telescreens. Perhaps that has been a near fatal mistake on my part. But frankly, I'd never have supposed this type of entertainment would have fixed such a powerful grip on the imagination of the people—"

"You never read *Slan Plus*? Or *Inside the Core*?" Jordan Eyre's astonished eyes reflected his incredulity. "Or saw the production, *Fifth Galaxy*?"

"No."

"Or imagined yourself trapped in the Mesozoic?"

"Damn me, no." Grant Pinckney chuckled. "But I'm learning."

He gestured at the piles of canned film. "If you don't mind, let's run those reels of *Monsters of Phobos* again. I thought I detected a clue there, Jordan."

"By all means," Eyre said. He sprang with alacrity to the projector and mounted the reel.

For the next hour and half both scientists were detached from reality and transported to a world of crystal mists and magic. A world where Theris, queen of the Silver Shores, languished as a captive of Targ of Phobos, until her lover, Prince Galgan, rescued her from a pit of crawling slegs.

"Good Lord," said Grant Pinckney, when the word *finis* at last crossed the screen. "They spend money on that?"

"It grossed twelve million dollars," said Jordan Eyre. "And here you and I are lucky if we ever make GS-15 and retirement."

"Tell me," said Pinckney, "don't you ever have bad dreams after a session with this material?"

Jordan Eyre looked puzzled. "Not since I was a kid." He grinned. "You get toughened."

"But the impossibility of all these things——"

"Any more impossible than Martians? We have Martians living right among us, now."

"And these other grotesque objects——?"

"——are no more fantastic, either, when you get down to it, doctor." Jordan Eyre began rewinding the projector. "After you've grown up riding the same subways with creatures from fifty million miles distant, nothing particular fazes you. And it'd be a dull world without make-believe, wouldn't it?"

"Indeed, it would," said Pinckney.

But when he spoke, he was not thinking of robots, slans, or time machines. His mind had returned to a childhood peopled with D'Artagnan, Jim Bridger, Peter the Brazen . . . and other glorious figures . .

A childhood with calm nights.

He said, "What say, we get back to the tasks at hand? How're the news accounts coming along?"

"I've brought 'em up to within four years of date," Eyre reported. "Funny how most of the big headlines were caused by stratoplane crashes. You'd think there was a jinx on any craft that soared higher than twenty miles."

Pinckney glanced at the sheaf of reports. His index finger pointed

to one particular item. "This interests me," he said. "Have it followed up."

Eyre glanced over his shoulder. "The blow-up of the V-3 factory in Nevada, eh?" The younger man's brow wrinkled. "Quite a setback to space navigation that was. Just four and a half years ago. You think it's connected with the high incidence of insanity?"

"I don't know," said Grant Pinckney. His dark eyes flashed. "I don't even know if the country's half as crazy as we suspect."

At noon each day, Pinckney was accustomed to dine inside the crowded P.C.C. building. But one afternoon towards the end of the third week, when his suppressed claustrophobia came to the fore, he yielded to the desire for a longer breathing spell from his work and agreed to walk along Michigan Avenue with Jordan Eyre.

The two headed for an out-of-doors restaurant the junior psychologist had touted highly.

The nation's new capital bore little scars of the war; but then it had not taken the terrific bomb damage wreaked on Washington. The day was warm and sunny, and the lake waters at the Oak Street Beach, across from the State Department Building, were a sheet of placid blue.

At the restaurant, Pinckney and his companion seated themselves at a sidewalk table where their view—but only incidentally—took in a few early-season girl bathers, luxuriously stretched upon the sand to obtain maximum ultra-violet.

Halfway through their lunch, Jordan Eyre suddenly declared, "You claim you've never seen a Martian, doctor. Well, take a good look across the street——"

Grant Pinckney strained his eyes, but could make out no unfamiliar object.

"I don't seem to——"

"Getting out of the taxi at the corner," Eyre supplied. "The three-wheeler cab."

Pinckney had seen the parked cab but no one inside it except the driver. Now a blur formed in the back seat. The next moment, the occupant became entirely visible. A grey-skinned baboon-like creature with large pinkish eyes the size of plates. It got out of the cab and paid the driver, who drove off.

"Do they always do that?" Pinckney asked.

"Do what?"

"Materialize in that odd manner——"

"I don't get you." Eyre looked genuinely puzzled. "The creature didn't materialize. I saw it the moment the tri-wheeled taxi appeared in the street."

I've been under too much stress recently, Pinckney thought. I'm letting the *big problem* get me down. The psychologist resolved to have his vision examined at the earliest opportunity. There was no reason why he shouldn't have been able to make out the Martian clearly at such a short distance.

"Look, he's crossing the street," Jordan Eyre said. "You'll be able to study him at close range. Hardly looks intelligent, does he, sir? And yet—"

The Martian plopped at a table near the restaurant doors and ordered a meal. Presently, the waiter returned bearing a cocktail, and then a platter of steak.

"You'd think they'd have gotten commerce under way between the two worlds, by now—wouldn't you?" Pinckney commented. "What held up the parade? Are they finicky about their secrets—or what?"

"Nobody knows. The creatures just popped up a few years ago, as friendly visitors. Not many people were really surprised about it, however—not after the flying saucers episode. Goes to show. Most people are sturdy enough to take walloping surprises in stride. I insist on that, even if our statistics do prove the human race is wacked . . ."

"Not to change the subject," said Pinckney, "did you get me the information on that V-3 plant explosion?"

"Most of it," said Eyre. "Pretty tough to manage, too—the way the government had it classified. I went through four painful loyalty interrogations. The V-3's were super-duper versions of the old V-2, designed to high-tail it to the moon and all points up. One night, every man-jack in the plant apparently fell asleep at his job—including a couple of tough guards who lived to tell the tale. Next thing you knew, bingo! Nothing but debris, scattered all over Goldfield, Nevada. Apparently, the physicists and engineers just sat down and cried. Nobody's tried to rebuild, since."

"Very interesting," said Pinckney. He stole another quick glance at the Martian at the far table.

The creature's body was shimmering as though enclosed in a crinkled halo of ice or plastic, that hampered the passage of light. Suddenly, as Pinckney's eyes winced, the translucent wrap seemed to melt away, leaving the Martian's outlines as solid and clear as an object centred in a well-composed color photograph.

"Wonder what they're talking about?" Eyre asked.

"Who?"

"Our Martian and the friend, who just joined him."

Pickney stared again, wondering how he could have been so mistaken. There were indeed two Martians at the table, engaged in spirited

conversation. For a second or two, they halted and allowed their huge eyes to rove over the scene. The psychologist felt their unblinking gaze land on him and Eyre briefly, then pass onward. For a reason he could not explain, he shuddered.

But why hadn't he been unable to see the second Martian, until somebody pointed the creature out to him? He found himself baffled and vaguely uneasy.

He glanced at his watch. "Can't stall any longer, Jordan. We better get back and tackle the problem some more."

"As you say," Eyre replied. "I never thought I would get tired of reading fantasy—but after three weeks of analyzing magazines and films for the story elements they've got in common, oh brother! I'm pretty near bushed. I'd almost relish a good old-fashioned western yarn."

"So would I," said Pinckney, enigmatically.

Andrew Steele's health appeared to have improved considerably since he had passed the buck on the distressing problem his government agency had unearthed to Grant Pinckney. Pinckney, himself, as he was ushered into Steele's offices, noted and approved the change—reflecting that the man would have suffered a nervous breakdown in short order, had he continued with the load on his own shoulders.

Would have, that is, if those already insane were still capable of suffering nervous breakdowns . . .

Now, the veteran psychologist wondered how the news he had to offer—news that seemed to present a solution to the unnatural mental state of the populace as revealed by the Psychological Census Commission's own statistics—would affect the chief.

"Sit down, Dr. Pinckney," Steele said. "I understand you've made progress." He uttered a short laugh. "Within five weeks too. That's a record for a government operation . . ."

Pinckney did not laugh in return, even as a gesture of companionableness. His beard had begun to assume its former shagginess; he tugged at it, before he spoke. His voice was flat, serious. "I've been forced to revise your original estimate. Not even ten per cent of the people are still sane."

The fine glow faded from Steele's solid face. "You're sure?"

Pinckney nodded.

"How much, then? Five per cent?"

"Not even that much. Nor one per cent, nor even one-tenth of one per cent. The truth I've arrived at is a bitter one . . ."

"You and me?" said Steele, slightly frightened now.

"Not even you. *Just me.*"

"Just you, doctor?" Steele asked. Further shock had rendered his complexion ashen.

"It appears," continued Pinckney, "that I am the only sane man left in the entire country." He brought out one of his rare cigars and lit it. He was not enjoying his moment. "I don't mind saying, that I feel extremely lonely," he added.

"Enough!" said Steele, recovering. "This is all nonsense. I ask you, in all seriousness, to come down here and find out why the Königsdorf tests suggested such a high prevalence of insanity. You hadn't practised for twenty years. But although, you'd piddled around in research, nothing had occurred to eclipse your reputation. I believed in your ability—or I wouldn't have turned the job over to you. But this . . . this . . ." He began to sputter. ". . . this fantastic suggestion of yours is an outrage, Dr. Pinckney."

"I am sorry for you," said Pinckney quietly.

The commission chief stared at the psychologist. "What makes you think I'm insane?" he asked.

"Simple," said Pinckney. "You believe in Martians."

Steele's mouth gaped open. "What do you mean? Of course, I believe in them."

"I don't," Pinckney replied. "*Ergo*: I'm sane." He puffed heavily on his cigar. "There are no Martians; there never were any."

"Just a moment," said Steele.

He pressed a button on the office intercom that rested on his desk and conversed briefly with his secretary outside. When he was finished, he motioned to Pinckney to walk around the desk and peer into the steroscreen.

"The viewplate looks into my reception room," Steele explained. "What do you see there — on the settee?"

"A Martian," said Pinckney. He began to sweat a little.

"And you claim he isn't real," Steele snorted.

"You don't believe me, because you don't want to," Pinckney told him. "You prefer to cling to your hallucination."

"Hallucination! That Martian has been waiting for thirty minutes to see me. The message he has is supposed to be important. Would you rather I talked to him — or to you?"

"To me, if you please."

"All right, but I hope you make sense."

Grant Pinckney had dealt with psychopathic types often, during that war period twenty-five years earlier when he was employed by the

government. Since that time however, most of his energy had been directed towards problems in the abstract. He had almost forgotten how to deal with a man who was afflicted by a severe psychosis.

The psychologist said, "I have no other choice but to tell you the truth, as I see it. Your hallucination — like the rest of mankind's — is visual, auditory, sensory and highly persistent. No amount of argument on my behalf will make you destroy your own illusions. But until I give you this report, my job is uncompleted.

"Let me review a little history for you. The first sign of trouble goes back to before the war. Mass hysteria caused the people to believe they saw space vessels in the sky — flying saucers. Why were they so willing to believe? Because the literature of the day had made them grow accustomed to the possibility of extra-terrestrial life. Their horizons had broadened to encompass new ideas.

"There were no saucers, of course. Even *we* know that. Yet the mental images of them were remarkably retentive, weren't they?"

"As the years went on, scientific literature with fantastic plots became the main staple of diet on the newsstands, in the cinemas and over television. Audiences became as familiar with alien monsters and weird space ships, as people in the Middle Ages were with the idea of witches, warlocks, ogres, fairies and what have you. Convince a citizen of the Fourteenth Century there were no such things as witches? *Bah!* He'd seen 'em.

"Now then, the first Martians appeared about eleven years ago. They landed on a sandlot near Santa Ana, California. First to observe them was a gang of kiddies playing a game called "moon pirates." The visitors' ship was remarkably simple in design, yet the secret of its motive power was never determined.

"By the end of that same year, friendly Martians had landed in groups all over America and parts of England. *But*, nowhere else on the globe. Soon, their presence was accepted in all but the most rural communities. Significantly, they acted no more intelligent than humans — another mystery which puzzled people for a short while, until the puzzled ones disappeared.

"Living a sheltered existence, remote from civilization, at Castle-ton, I'd never seen a Martian until I came to the capital. The first time one came near by, it might just as well have been invisible — until a friend pointed it out. Why? Because, Steele, my mind first had to be opened to suggestion.

"Tests I've made since that day prove to me that Martians are only a figment of men's imagination. This mass insanity has developed to a point where the hallucinations have assumed concrete form.

People believe in Martians because they want desperately to believe in them. The only solution is *re-education of the public*. We must fight for a return to reality!"

Grant Pinckney looked up at the conclusion of his report to discover that Andrew Steele's face had turned an angered red. The chief said, "In respect for your past reputation, I will submit your report to my superiors. I've no doubt it will be laughed at — I'm laughing at it right now. The best thing you can do, Pinckney, is to pack and get out. Your usefulness is ended."

"I thought that might be your reaction," Pinckney replied. "So, the load is back on your shoulders. Let's hope you bear it better than you were bearing it, when you came up to my home — asking for help."

The psychologist snatched up his brief case and strode from the chief's office. Passing through the antechamber, he saw the round-eyed Martian still waiting patiently, the same one he had spied in the intercom screen.

Pinckney halted and stared at the creature. It shimmered slightly and almost faded. The next moment, however, the wavering ceased and the Martian appeared more substantial than ever. A slight shiver of fear plucked at Pinckney's nerves, as he became aware of his failure. He hurried out to the corridor.

That same afternoon, Pinckney related to Jordan Eyre, his assistant, a complete account of his interview with Steele. Eyre said, "He's blind, sir. Like all of us are, like I was until this morning . . ."

"This morning?"

Eyre nodded. "I studied a Martian closely in an attempt to convince myself of its non-existence. I almost succeeded in making it fade until another human being came into the hallway, whereupon the monster became fully-fleshed again. Dr. Pinckney, I do know you're right. They're nothing but persistent, materialized hallucinations . . ."

"But, dangerous just the same," Pinckney warned. "Be careful, Jordan. I'm going back to Castleton, where they're seldom seen. If you stay in Chicago, watch your step —"

"I'll do that, sir," Eyre promised.

Grant Pinckney completed his packing about eight o'clock that evening in his hotel room, overlooking Michigan Avenue. His mind kept returning to the Martian who had been waiting in Andrew Steele's reception room. Was the call a routine one — or had the creature a

more pressing purpose in its visit to the Psychological Census Commission?

He thought of the reports he had studied about the blow-up of the V-8 factory and the numerous crashes of vessels that had threatened to break through the barrier of outer space.

Were they by design or accident? And if by design, what sinister purpose could lie behind the attacks?

Was it possible the Martians themselves were the ones most anxious to prevent mankind from crossing space and landing on Mars?

Mars, where men would find an empty wasteland of wind-strewn deserts . . . a planet devoid of all traces of life. Mars, where men would finally learn the horrible truth that there were no Martians.

Nowhere in the universe would mankind life and companionship and the realisation of his utter loneliness had had strange consequences . . .

The argument bristled with logic.

Pinckney placed a revolver across the folded apparel in his light valise and snapped the bag shut. He would not rest easy until he was once again secure in his cottage retreat near Sturgeon Bay. He strode to the window and regarded the scurrying night life below.

With darkness, the boulevard became a thoroughfare entirely different from what it was in the bright sunlight of day. At night, traffic dwindled and shadows lengthened. People it seemed preferred their homes and firesides, their television and novels, to the night clubs and cabarets which had made pre-war Chicago a great convention city. Only a few restless fun-seekers and an occasional Martian prowled the empty sidewalks between the dead buildings.

He glanced at his watch. It was time to leave for the airport. Descending to the lobby, he hailed a taxicab at the door and rode south towards the big new landing drome built on the demolished site of the University and its Field House.

His skin prickled as the taxi bore him along the deserted streets beyond the area of government buildings, an uneasy sensation suggestive of being followed.

But when his eyes — peering through the rear window — sought to penetrate the gloom of the neighborhoods he had just passed through, there were no headlights of another vehicle in pursuit to be seen.

Nerves, he told himself. His suppressed claustrophobia was asserting itself by manufacturing fears and anxieties of a deeper sort. He would have to get a grip upon himself. Once back in Castleton, plunged into work, his disturbed nervous system should reassume its former state of calm.

The cab reached the airport without further incident. Pinckney



boarded the plane to Green Bay and from there, transferred immediately to a northbound bus that would take him out on the Peninsula.

He arrived in Castleton after midnight. The shrouded village had gone to sleep; houses were darkened, street lamps lowered. The new arrival was forced to walk through the principal street to reach his home at the far edge of town.

Here, the shadows seemed far darker, far more pronounced than the shapeless blots cast along the capital's streets and alleys. Pinckney's abnormally active mind could see how much such shadows might suggest strange monsters to a heightened imagination. Monsters crouched to pounce upon the unlucky wayfarer.

He began to recall the few vague yarns of terror he had read in his childhood. Dracula prowling the ruined castles of Transylvania. The Morlocks who lived underground in Wells' unimaginably remote future. The Kraken, slumbering at the bottom of the Norwegian sea.

Damn me, Pinckney thought, I'll be turning into a skizzt myself—if this keeps up. He tugged at his beard and forced himself to chuckle. No more nightmares for him, he vowed. No more jitters. Back to the clear bright world of scientific research. In the morning, he would dust off his notebooks on tropism, inspect his beloved plants . . .

Now, he had reached the porch step of his cottage and was admitting himself by key.

Miss Crispin, her customary uniform shed for a sleeping-robe carefully wrapped around her plump body, came down the stairs as he stepped into the hall.

She said, "I got your telegram . . . and made some coffee for you, doctor."

"Thank you, Miss Crispin. I'll take it in the kitchen."

He followed her to the rear of the house and sat down in his cheerful breakfast nook, while his housekeeper-assistant poured his cup. The brightness of the room contrasted oddly with the impenetrable dark of outside that was framed by the chintz-curtained windows.

"Miss Crispin, do you read much?" Pinckney asked her.

"Not much," she replied. "Too busy, doctor. I do have a few novels in my room . . ."

"May I ask what kind?"

She blushed. "Love stories."

"Good," he replied. "I congratulate you."

He saw her search his face for irony.

"Nothing personal meant," he assured her. "By the way, do you believe in Martians?"

"Do you mean, am I for them or against them? I can't say.

Certainly, I've detected no harm in any of the ones I've seen — "

"Then, you have seen some?"

"Oh, yes sir." Miss Crispin got up from her place opposite him and twisted the knob on a mantel radio. "Would you like to hear the news?"

Before he could answer, the set glowed into life. Pinckney's ears pricked as heard a late-hour announcer saying ". . . was found terribly mutilated outside the Psychological Census Commission building. Police officials are perplexed at what appears to be a complete lack of motive. Eyre's sister, with whom he lived, declared he was not in the habit of carrying large sums of money — "

"TURN THAT OFF!" Pinckney shouted.

Miss Crispin sprang to obey. Her mouth fell open; her eyes were plainly terrified.

She said, "I'm sorry, doctor."

Then, a second later, "I believe I heard a knock."

Pinckney's rage had passed. "A knock — ?" he inquired dazedly.

But she was already gone, hurrying through the house to answer the peremptory summons at the door.

And was back again in a few seconds.

"Someone to see you, sir."

Grant Pinckney stood up, his heart pounding fiercely. He dragged himself forward with leaden feet. *They couldn't have found me this soon, he thought.* It was impossible.

He entered the hall and faced the front door resolutely.

"Good evening," said the creature, standing in the threshold.

"I understand you don't believe in us."

Pinckney's mouth hardened into a grim line. This was a hallucination. All creatures of the human imagination could be defeated by control of that same imagination. He tensed his body and said, "Go away. You're not real."

The creature's huge eyes dimmed. Its queer-shaped body began to fade. For a moment, it almost appeared to shimmer into nothingness.

At that moment, Miss Crispin reappeared in the hallway. "Why, it really is a Martian," she said. "I thought so . . ."

The nocturnal visitor ceased to fade. Now, it grew in bulk until it seemed to fill the entire doorway. Grant Pinckney stood petrified at sight of what the creature was carrying half-hidden under its arm . . . what it was raising and pointing at him . . .

Miss Crispin cried out: "Oh, DON'T . . . !"

ROBERT DONALD LOCKE

By Needle And Thread

*He had murdered his best friend with a needle
and thread. . . . his problem was to find out how.*

Illustrated by Harry Turner

May 16th, 2198 A.D. Earth Reckoning. 65th year of voyage.

THE monotony of Star Flight No. 1 is steadily growing worse. There is nothing but an eternal sameness within the ship and outside. Sixty five years of listening to the constant high-pitched whine of the ship's drive heading for some star whose name I have forgotten, is leaving me a physical wreck.

I feel that the time has come when I must endeavour to face facts. These past few nights I have been very frightened, really terrified. A few weeks ago I was a sane, healthy man; now I am weak, irresolute and, I fear, on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Perhaps I am only imagining things. But an incident occurred today that made me realize men were not built to stand the strain of Star Flight. If I set down all that happened here — or rather, that which is happening — when I look at what I have written again next day, I shall at least get some idea of what lies at the bottom of my fears.

That is why I have decided to start keeping a diary. In it I intend

to argue matters out with myself until I reach a logical conclusion for this thing that is hidden from me and then, perhaps, I shall be able to face it better and save my sanity.

The incident I speak of began when Gerald Frazer, a new apprentice in our tailoring department, referred to me as a mummified corpse who should be placed in the disposal chute to make room for more useful members of the ship's community. For a moment I was inclined to shout at Frazer and ask him what was I if not a useful member of that community. But I held my peace. I knew I was essential.

With all their much vaunted progress back on Earth they never succeeded in inventing anything to take the place of a tailor. The Commander and his crew, the growing community of this Star Flight that may continue for another hundred years, would never have their uniforms and clothing but for our tailoring department, hidden away in a remote corner of this great ship.

As the head baister of that department, I resolved not to lose my dignity by quarreling with young Frazer. But I thought the rest of our staff showed a lamentable lack of intelligence in being amused by his silly prattle. Frazer even went so far as to use the nick-name "Old Baister" by which I am known to my friends throughout the ship. He did not realize I was listening, of course, and went on to describe me as a spineless old wreck whom he could never visualize as having strong emotions or passions. Quite an act he put on for the benefit of the staff.

At first I was mildly angry, but in some curious fashion the more I thought about his remarks the more my anger increased. Later, when I calmed down, I began to wonder what a ship-born youngster like Frazer could have known about passions or emotions, particularly the passions that lay in the heart of an Earth-born man like myself. I tried to imagine his shocked surprise if I told him that I had killed a man on board this ship while he was still an infant in arms. It would have been interesting to watch the horror and revulsion cloud his boyish face at the knowledge that "Old Baister" was a murderer.

It was a good many years ago, of course, when I killed John Sebastian Howard; the ship had been five years out from Earth at the time. I had forgotten all about it until Frazer's remarks started a train of memory that made Howard's death seem only as yesterday.

I began thinking of the good times Howard and I had spent together, of our training for the Star Flight, our escapades, of women we had known, of the countless little things that had made our friendship. Then, suddenly, I was shocked to find that I could not remember how or why I killed him.

For a moment I strove hard trying to concentrate on elusive images.

Then my mind raced round in panic trying to recall some detail that would give me a clue to the reason for killing him. But there was no clue, no reason, nothing but the fact that I had murdered John Sebastian Howard in a deliberate, cold-blooded manner.

I was very frightened by this sudden blankness of memory. Somehow I managed to conceal my agitation from the staff and finish the day's work in a normal manner. I thought the day would never end till I could get to my cabin and start this diary.

Somehow I have to convince myself that the black-out is only temporary, and that tomorrow I will remember how I killed John Sebastian Howard.

May 17th

I had no success with the problem of Howard's death, although I stayed awake all the night trying to puzzle it out. The night was hell and the day was nothing better. The screaming whine of the ship's drive, the incredible blankness of memory, all gave me a feeling of events beyond control rushing to a climax.

During the day young Frazer applied for a transfer to the engine room and left our department. He was most impertinent to Mr. Humber, our controller, before leaving. In the presence of all the staff he made an insolent speech, and stated that he would rather clean up the ship's garbage than wither away among senile, Earth-born wrecks.

I envied Frazer his youth at that moment. And now I have a conviction that he was right. We *are* an elderly lot in our department. We were all born on Earth and our conversation nearly always deals with affairs of that planet. A ship-born man like Frazer has nothing in common with us.

After the up-set of Frazer's speech, when things had quietened down a little, I was thinking about John Sebastian Howard. Suddenly I remembered that I had killed him with a needle and thread. It was a huge relief to know that my mind was functioning clearly once more, and that the Star Flight was not affecting it as I had suspected. But a needle and thread — that set me a greater problem. How had I used them to kill Howard?

A small tailor's needle and a piece of thread were things I used every day; it baffled me how I had used them to commit a murder. I developed a violent headache trying to work the problem out. I knew beyond all doubt that John Sebastian Howard was killed by a needle and thread, but in what manner I had used them to kill him I hadn't the faintest recollection.

The problem worried me so much that I was unable to concentrate

on my work. Piles of cloth lay unattended on the bench before me, and there formed in my mind a picture of Howard's cheery young face with its alert, clear grey eyes. For years he had been my friend and constant companion. When they found him dead in his cabin there had been no suspicion that I was the cause. It was a clever piece of work and I was exceedingly proud of it at the time. Then for sixty years or more I put all thought of it out of my mind and continued with my work on the ship as if nothing had happened.

And how I regret that murder now! But that is only wishful thinking. Howard is dead and can never return. It is suddenly very frightening alone here in my cabin when I think of John Sebastian Howard being dead sixty years. I have a needle and thread on the desk before me as I write; I am hoping that they will start some train of thought that will lead to an explanation.

May 18th

Sameness everywhere! Inside my head there is a desperate feeling of being trapped. The screaming of the ship's drive last night was like a wild laughter, mocking my efforts to solve the mystery of the needle and thread. All through the day, too, I pondered on that problem without success. The day seemed an eternity.

In view of the mental upheaval that I sustained in the past few days, it is somewhat surprising to be able to report that I stood up to an even greater shock today. Perhaps it was due to my brain having become addled with fatigue from striving to find an answer to the problem of the needle and thread that the shock did not register at the time.

What I am getting at is, Mr. Humber knows that I killed John Sebastian Howard. I don't think that he has told anyone. Therefore it is imperative to discover how I used the needle and thread on Howard; Humber must be silenced in the same way before he talks.

I have no one to blame for Humber's discovery but myself. I was careless, grossly careless. Without realizing the danger, I commenced to make some notes during work hours about the problem of John Sebastian Howard's death. My reasons were twofold, first I was hoping that a system of tabulation might aid my memory, second I could not wait for night and the privacy of my own cabin — I was too eager to get what facts I could remember down on paper.

I had filled two pages with details when I felt the presence of someone near me. It was Humber. He was standing close to me, stiff as a ram-rod, and his lean face was creased in an angry frown at the unfinished work on my bench. He snapped my notes away and ordered me to get on with the work. He stood for several minutes crumpling

them in his hands and watching me obey his order. Then he left the room, unfolding the crumpled papers as he went and reading them.

It took several minutes for the seriousness of the situation to register on my brain. When it did I felt like a rabbit must feel when he faces the bared fangs of a weasel — I was petrified.

About ten minutes later Humber came back into the room, and I realised by the startled expression on his face that he knew about John Sebastian Howard. I expected a denouncement right then. But Humber remained silent throughout the day.

Whether he intends to denounce me later, or whether he intends some form of blackmail, I have no idea. But I do know the suspense is killing me.

May 19th

I took a triple dose of sleeping tablets last night in an effort to ease the tension within me. I went completely "out" in a few minutes. But I had the most horrible vivid dreams. In the dreams Howard was alive; sometimes he was smiling at me, sometimes the most diabolical expressions were on his face. Then the dream changed and I saw Howard gazing at me with a great sadness in his eyes. That was the peculiar thing about the dream — all through it there ran a strain of ineffable sadness. It was as if something infinitely precious had been lost beyond recovery. I woke up, sobbing my heart out.

I got quite a shock when I looked in the mirror to shave this morning. My face was always on the fat side but it has lost that chubby look it had a few days ago; my grey eyes are dull and there are heavy pouches underneath them. It is possible that, owing to my present state of health, I may recently have become the victim of hallucinations. I admit that. But of one fact I am positive; I killed John Sebastian Howard with a needle and thread sixty years ago and I am not going to have any peace of mind until I remember all the details of that murder.

Must stop now — time for the day's work.

Later

This is appalling. I am almost certain that Humber has told the staff about Howard's murder. Now I am not up against one but many.

All through the day various members of the staff watched me with cat-like intent. Some of them approached me with sympathetic enquiries about my health, others wanted to give me assistance with my work. Like a fool, I was quite pleased by this sudden show of kindness. Then, suddenly, it dawned on me that it was not good-nature on the staff's part that prompted these sympathetic expressions and offers of assistance.



They were all together in a plot with Humber. They wanted to find out how I killed John Sebastian Howard.

It makes me laugh. Do they think I am so stupid as to tell them how to commit a perfect murder — even if I could remember? Why, with a means like that at their disposal the ship would become a mad house within a week. It makes me see how important it is to discover how I used the needle and thread on Howard before the staff work the method out for themselves.

May 20th

Yesterday was, I think, the blackest of the many black days that have fallen to my lot lately. After I had brought my diary up to date I went to bed and, it is somewhat surprising to report, spent an excellent night — if one can call it "night" on board this screaming hulk of metal countless light-years away from Earth. Perhaps I owe my good night to the subconscious relief at the knowledge that I am up against a human enemy and not an indefinable thing like blankness of memory — though that, too, still remains.

In human conflict there is always a sporting chance that the weaker party may come out on top; although the fact that Humber has made

no overt act since discovering my notes makes me feel very uneasy. Why should Humber play with me in this cat and mouse fashion? What does he intend to do? And why can't I remember how I killed John Sebastian Howard?

If I could find an answer to that last question I would not give a snap of my finger for Humber or his intentions. But until I do, I must be wary.

Later

I'll need all my wits about me to defeat Humber. The cunning devil! He played his cards with supreme finesse today. I still feel weak when I think of the way he has manoeuvred me into a position that is almost hopeless. The bitter thing is, it was my own carelessness that gave him this new opportunity.

It was late in the afternoon and I was finishing off some work. The staff room was quiet — except for the overall whine of the ship's drive — and the staff were busy at their work benches. Now and again the silence was broken by the hum of an electric cloth cutter, and sometimes a faint sound from the bowels of the ship penetrated the quiet. It was a warm, drowsy atmosphere and I was mulling over the problem of the needle and thread. Suddenly I became aware that I was talking to myself about that problem. I glanced around self-consciously, hoping that no one had noticed my lapse.

Then a sudden chill ran through me as I saw Humber. He was standing so near that he was almost touching me. A speculative look was on his narrow face. There was a moment of perfect stillness in the room as our eyes met, then a sound of feverish activity as the staff bent over their work benches. But that activity did not deceive me: I knew the staff must have known of Humber's presence in the room long before I did. They could have warned me. They didn't. Therefore it was proof that they were working in concert with Humber, and he must have heard every word I uttered.

A furious hatred reared up inside me, making my breathing rough and my body tremble. I moved forward to demand an explanation from Humber but he turned on his heel and walked away, muttering something about retiring me from the staff.

I thought about that threat for hours. I am still thinking about it. Retire me, "Old Baister," one of the few remaining Earth-born on board the ship! That would be the last straw. To be retired on board this ship means relieved of all duty and sent to twiddle one's thumbs among a lot of senile, incompetent men and women who have broken down under the strain of Star Flight. It's a living hell. And Humber

has the power to send me there. I would do anything to avoid retirement — even to telling Humber how to commit a perfect murder with a needle and thread. Oh, God. I must try to remember.

May 22nd

I am still here. I could not bring myself to write anything yesterday. I was too utterly exhausted. My only remaining hope is that I may manage to hang on to my sanity until I solve the needle and thread problem.

On Tuesday night I paced up and down the small confines of my cabin like a caged animal. I could not bring my mind to concentrate on any one subject for more than an instant; it kept darting about in all directions.

Memory pictures of my past and present flashed in a kaleidoscopic series of jumbled events. For a brief instant I saw myself as a boy going fishing on a hot, drowsy summer's day, bare legged and bare headed with my father's fishing rod slung across my shoulder. A great nostalgia filled my heart and my eyes grew wet with tears.

The picture changed and I remembered Anna — Anna so tall and slim and lovely. I could almost see her before me and feel the hot sweet odour of her flesh impinging on my nostrils as it had done so many times. I moved to take her in my arms and she was gone.

Then my father took her place. Hard faced and stern he shouted at a slender youth. "See here my lad, I'll not stand for this nonsense. Engineering courses, eh? Who's going to pay for them? You're getting above yourself, son. You'll follow in your father's footsteps and enter the tailoring business or I'll know the reason why." And the youth gave way before that strong willed old man and entered a trade he hated. That memory made me despise myself. I should have stood up to my father and struck out on my own. But I have to admit that I was always weak and an easy prey to the stronger willed.

They were monotonous years that followed, years that were like solitary confinement. I was always striving to burst from the invisible cage that held me, striving for some sort of freedom away from the common herd. I thought I had attained that freedom when I was accepted for Star Flight No. 1, but even there the very insignificance of my trade made me a slave to routine. From the meanest cabin boy to the Commander himself, there was always a pitying smile for poor "Old Baister."

And so the episodes flashed in an endless procession through my brain, all except the one I wanted most to remember. John Sebastian Howard and all connected with him remained shadowy images in the



background, while his aura — or whatever it was — seemed to permeate the very air of the cabin. I threw myself on the bunk, mentally and physically exhausted, and tried to get some sleep. But sleeping or waking it seemed that I could not escape Howard.

Later

I know I can't stand much more. For hours I have been toying with the idea of taking my own life. But suicide is against all tenets of my religious convictions, besides I have not the necessary courage. I am literally at my wit's end.

There is Humber on one side threatening me with retirement, on the other there is the staff watching me on Humber's behalf and ready to pounce at my slightest mistake; and there is the problem of the needle and thread. Which ever way I turn I am faced with insurmountable obstacles.

Later

For the past half hour I have been casting frantically about in my mind for a means to defend myself, but now I realize that the situation is hopeless. I am beaten. There is no way out for me. But I'll not give Humber the satisfaction of being the one to retire me. Tomorrow I

will go the ship's guards and tell them everything about John Sebastian Howard. That, at least, will save me from retirement. It means death, I know, but death is preferable.

Curiously enough, now that the decision is made, I am at peace with myself for the first time since starting this diary. I know I shall have a good night.

May 23rd

Well, it's over. The problem is solved. And I am free, gloriously free for the first time in years. Really, the ship's guards are very clever in some matters, though very stupid in others. It seems that there are numerous ways in which you can kill a man with a needle and thread; the guards told me so many different methods that I am sure one of them must have been the method I used to kill Howard.

But the stupidity of the guards in the other matter makes me laugh, although I shudder at stupidity that allows a murderer to go free.

The best way to explain the whole affair is to write out a verbatim report of my interviews with the guards, as well as I can remember it. A case of mistaken identity, I am inclined to call it. But the guards will never learn about it from me.

Well, I entered the guard room on my way to work.

"I want to confess to the murder of John Sebastian Howard," I said to a stout officer. "I killed him with a needle and thread, ages ago."

"Eh?" The stout officer leaned across his desk. "You killed who?"

"John Sebastian Howard," I replied, "with a needle and thread."

"Oh, I see." He motioned a young guard forward. "With a needle and thread, now — How long ago was this?"

"Fifty or sixty years ago. Sometime shortly after the ship left Earth," I said, telling him my name and giving my number and status in the tailoring department.

He whispered something to the young guard, who saluted smartly and left the room. When we were alone I relaxed in a deep chair and told the officer everything about John Sebastian Howard, and the great mental strain to which I had been subjected.

He was exceptionally courteous and helped me in every way with my statement, even to suggesting various methods by which I might have killed Howard. I must have fallen asleep listening to him for I was suddenly aware that he was no longer speaking to me but to the young guard who was back in the room.

Through half closed eyes I watched the officer peer intently in my

direction as he beckoned the young guard forward. I remained quite still.

Then the young man addressed his superior in a low voice.

"I have been to see Mr. Humber, sir. He says he has been expecting something like this for weeks. The old man is breaking down under Star Flight. He's the oldest Earth-born on board the ship."

"Then why the devil didn't they retire him?"

"Mr. Humber explained that, sir. The old fellow gave no trouble and was very well liked by the staff. Quite a character; 'Old Baister' they call him."

"What age is he?"

"Eighty-five years, sir."

"Huh, eighty-five years." The officer stroked his chin. "It's a miracle he didn't break years ago."

The young guard snorted. "That's putting it mildly, sir. If you saw the place where he works — Why, I'd go off the deep end myself if I spent a day there."

"Bad as that?"

"You'd have to see it for yourself, sir. I always knew there was a tailoring department on the ship, but where exactly I never bothered to find out. I had the devil of a job finding it. It's—It's like a museum. There's an air of decay about the whole place that gets you down. *And the staff* — old men, Earth-born every one of them. They seem more like exhibits than people. It gave me the creeps." The guard shivered.

"Gave you the creeps, did it?" The officer lowered his voice. "What kind of work does the old fellow do?"

"A kind of sewing called baisting, sir. He's the head baister."

"Sewing . . . with a needle and thread . . . sixty-five years of it . . ." The officer's voice trailed away and his fingers drummed a tattoo on the desk. Then: "What's the old fellow's name?" he asked.

And that was when I almost shouted—aghast at such stupidity—for everyone knows my name is Old Baister. But the young guard looked at me, then back to his superior and said:

"Howard, sir. John Sebastian Howard."

RICHARD P. ENNIS

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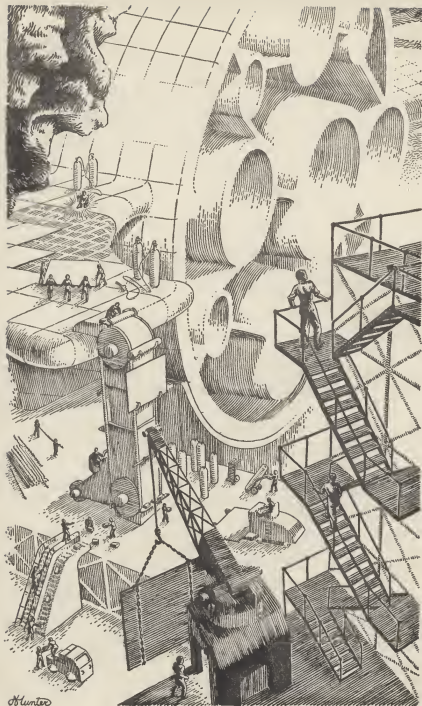
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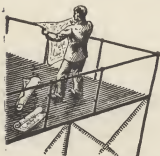
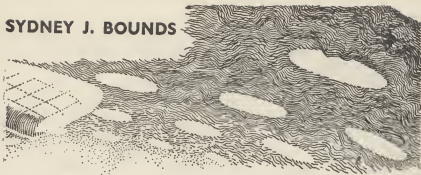
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SYDNEY J. BOUNDS



Project Star-Ship

*Russ Cazalet had to see that the Starship was ready in time
—he could not comprehend the forces working against him.*

Illustrated by Alan Hunter

“WE’RE leaving for Pluto next week.”

Katherine Cazalet stared blankly at her husband as he casually decided her future.

“Pluto?” She thought she must be dreaming, that she had imagined he said Pluto, but one look at his face showed he was serious. “It’s . . .” Words failed her. She took a deep breath. “It’s a long way.”

Russell Cazalet nodded vaguely. He wasn’t really listening; he’d told her, and that should be sufficient.

“A five months’ trip,” he said briefly, and snapped the lock on his case. “I have to go out. Business.”

She watched him move for the door. He was hardly conscious of her presence, his mind somewhere ahead at his appointment.

“I’d like to know a little more,” she said.

“Of course, Kate—later. I can’t stop to explain now.”

The door clicked quietly behind him and she was alone in the house.

Katherine sat down. She looked at the room, a pleasant room decorated to her own taste. Sunlight warmed it, streaming in through the east wall. Beyond was the blue of a summer sky, the green swath of rolling hills; trees were in blossom and, nearby, a bird sang gaily.

This was home, Earth in the year 1990. As the wife of a successful government executive, she lived comfortably. She did not want to be uprooted and planted again on cold, distant Pluto.

The house was large and airy, set in a beautiful part of the countryside. She had her own maid; the garage held two electric runabouts; they had just installed the latest 3-D colour screen. A tiny sigh escaped her lips. She could give up these things, she supposed . . .

She switched on the screen. It glowed with soft russet hues, chesnut and fawn and bistre; changed through damask and rose-red to angry crimson; sea-green shapes swirled and copper flames danced; azure pillars towered in perspective and golden spheres coalesced. The rhythm quickened.

Katherine recognized the form of Lhoté's Third Colour Symphony and, even though it was one of her favourites, switched off the screen. She could not concentrate.

She would go to Pluto, of course; she was his wife, and she loved him—though sometimes she wondered if he still loved her. A faint smile hovered about her lips. How long had they been married? Five years . . . long enough for her to have become used to the ways of Russ Cazalet.

This abrupt revelation was typical of him. Never, since their marriage, had he once consulted her about their future. He made the decisions, and she acquiesced. She was *his* wife.

And now, this . . . *We're leaving for Pluto next week.*

No warning, no explanation, just the bare statement. For a moment, she was furious, but the emotion died. She laughed. It was so like Russ she could not be angry. He did everything that way. It wasn't that he was selfish, simply that it never occurred to him she might have plans of her own. If he stopped to think for a moment—but his head was too full of his own plans for that.

He was a big man at thirty-five, and he wanted to be bigger. A rising executive, destined for a high place in the Civil Service. She was proud of him, but a little lonely. It wasn't much fun being married to a man who took her for granted.

Till now, it hadn't mattered much. She had her own friends and led her own life. She ran his house and acted as hostess when he invited business acquaintances home — Russ had no use for friends who

could not advance his career. They lived in a state of mutual toleration, not unlike that of many other married couples.

Perhaps it would have been different if their child had lived, though knowing Russ, she doubted it. Three years had passed since the doctors had told her she would not be able to have another child. The operation which saved her life had left her barren.

On Earth, she had her niche, could accept the inevitable. On Pluto, it would be different; just how different, she couldn't imagine.

The spaceship was three weeks out from Earth, accelerating gently under atomic power. Cazalet was still talking, this time to the Second Officer — the Captain had grown wary and kept to his cabin.

"It was inevitable they send for me, after the way I handled the Channel Dam. Before that, of course, I was in charge of the hydro system for the Scandinavian countries — not to mention the time I was called in to straighten out the Atlantic spaceport muddle. There were other jobs, too. Now, it's Project Star-ship . . ."

Watching him across the narrow width of the cabin serving as dining-room and bar on the spaceship, Katherine marvelled again at her husband's loquacity. To him, Russell Cazalet was the most interesting phenomenon in the universe, so it was only natural he should be the sole topic of conversation. It would not cross his mind that other people might become tired of Russ Cazalet as a permanent diet.

He kept a special tone of voice for talking about himself. Not pompous, rather it was a quiet confidence. He was doing a favour in letting others know about the remarkable abilities of Russ Cazalet. Even though he spoke in the first person, it was obvious that he thought of himself in the third. A split personality; he was his own Boswell.

"You've heard of Project Star-Ship, of course. A wonderful idea. Now that we've explored the planets of our own sun, it's time to think of other star systems. Atomic energy makes the journey possible, of course, though one's mind jibs at the realization of how long the trip will take. Years! Still, I don't doubt there will be plenty of volunteers when the time comes."

He's developing a paunch, Katherine thought critically, and his hair is beginning to recede — a few more years and he'll be bald.

"Pluto, being the outermost planet of our system, is the obvious starting point for the stars, and so the government decided to build a base there. The Star-Ship is under construction . . . and this is where I come into it."

Katherine was aware of the rhythmic pulsing of the air-conditioners, the close confines of that grey-walled cabin. Beyond the port-holes, the black void was sprinkled with stardust and, to her, it was unthinkable that anyone should want to be shut up in a spaceship for the long years to the stars.

"Work on Project Star-Ship is falling behind schedule," Russ Cazalet continued. "Badly behind, so I'm going out to set things right. I'm taking over the executive side, with instructions to take any steps I consider necessary to get the project back on schedule. I shall be staying till the ship is finished, a matter of some months, I anticipate.

"But I shall succeed. With my experience and methods, I have no doubt — no doubt at all — that I shall resolve whatever difficulties there are and bring Project Star-Ship to a successful conclusion. It will be one more advance in my career."

The Second Officer forced a smile.

"I wish you luck, Mr. Cazalet, and now, if you'll excuse me, I have a few routine observations to make."

He left the cabin with some haste.

Cazalet stared through the nearest port-hole and the emptiness of the view filled him with a sense of bleakness. He turned to his wife and inspected her closely. Never before had he spent so much time confined with her.

He surveyed her without sympathy. She was not pretty; her looks, if she'd had any, were gone. At thirty, she reminded him of a wizened monkey, and he wondered, idly, why he had married her. I suppose I fell in love, he thought, but could not identify a meaning behind the phrase.

His wife! What an extraordinary thing to have happened . . . not that he regretted marrying. She was useful, though he wished she had had a bit more "go" in her. The impassiveness with which she met each turn of her life irritated him. Life was something to control, not submit to passively.

Abruptly, he stood up and paced the room; then turning on her, he said:

"Four more months before we reach Pluto — my God, how *bored* I'm going to be."

The ship decelerated towards Pluto. The sun was a small and brilliant arc-light, incredibly distant and with no visible disc. The stars were remote.

Earth has a blue sky and trees and warm winds, Katherine thought. The longer the trip lasted, the harder it became to conjure up an image of Earth in her mind; and now that Pluto was before her through the portholes, even the words meant nothing.

She saw a world smaller than Earth, dark as space itself and frozen with cold. Sharp crags of black rock thrust their points through a white covering. No ordinary atmosphere, but perhaps a few rare, inert gases. A temperature near absolute zero. Seas of frozen ice and glaciers landlocked at the bottom of deep valleys.

Home, she thought bleakly, our new home.

"Pluto has an unusual set-up," Cazalet said. He had been motionless so long she thought he must be asleep. "The colony is run as a fifty-fifty collaboration between the government and private enterprise. A question of economics. The cost of establishing a base here was fantastically high; neither the government nor private enterprise could have managed it alone.

"However, conditions on Pluto are unique in two ways. From the viewpoint of Project Star-Ship, the planet is the logical stepping-off place for a journey beyond our solar system. More over, being so far from any natural source of heat, it is the ideal laboratory for low-temperature experiments. It is this second factor which Interplanet Chemicals are exploiting.

"At temperatures around absolute zero, chemical reactions are often startlingly different from what they would be on Earth, particularly so with organic compounds of a complex nature. The hormones are a case in point. It has been found possible to artificially create these vital secretions normally produced by the endocrine glands of the human body.

"Such hormones form the basis of treatment for rejuvenating aged body cells. Production is small and the cost high — you can imagine the result. A few wealthy men, getting on in years and feeling their youth slip from them, are prepared to pay big money for hormones from Pluto.

"So Interplanet Chemicals are making a profit which can only be measured in figures usually retained for astronomical observations. However, that need not bother us. Project Star-Ship is the official government scheme on Pluto and I do not imagine we shall become involved with the I.C. set-up."

Katherine saw a translucent bubble appear on the surface of the dark world.

"I suppose that's the colony," she said. "It looks very small."

Russell Cazalet corrected her.

"Merely, the point of contact with the surface, Kate. The colony

itself is below ground, to take advantage of the natural heat-insulating qualities of several thousand tons of solid rock."

It was a new idea to Katherine, something she had not thought about.

"We'll be living underground?" The idea was distasteful to her; she was still thinking in terms of blue skies and hot sunshine.

"Of course." A flicker of sardonic amusement crossed Cazalet's face. "You didn't imagine you'd live on an airless surface at a temperature of two hundred and seventy below?"

"I suppose not."

"You'll get used to it, Kate. Light, heat and power are supplied by an atomic pile. Food has to be brought in, of course, except for a few synthetic foodstuffs produced by the Interplanet laboratories. Fortunately, there is no difficulty about a water supply — Pluto has plenty in the form of ice."

She had never liked the idea of coming to Pluto, and now she began to hate it. Living underground, on synthetic food . . .

"I hope you can do your job quickly," she said. "I want to get back to Earth as soon as possible."

Cazalet said, confidently: "I'll have Project Star-Ship underway in no time — no time at all, Kate. And then I'll be stepping into a bigger job at home. You'll like that."

Katherine made no answer.

The Captain's voice sounded over the speakers: "Strap down everybody — we're landing."

Gravity was slightly less than that of Earth. At first, this was disturbing, but Katherine adapted quickly. The air was clean, with a slightly higher oxygen content than normal, and should have been invigorating; it wasn't — there was a dry heat, a heaviness, which combined with a lack of any wind, made the atmosphere one that dulled the senses.

She stood on bare rock, outside the ship which had brought them, looking up through the vast dome. Space pressed down in all its blackness and the stars glittered with a cold, unfriendly light. A sudden fear gripped her, and she shivered. This lonely outpost clung to a precarious existence in the teeth of overwhelming natural forces — it did not need much imagination to visualize the destruction of all who lived on Pluto.

So many things could go wrong. The dome crack — the air supply fail — the atomic plant explode — the relief ships fail to arrive on time. Existence depended on so many factors only just within the control of

men. On Earth, Nature was the provider; here the enemy . . . no-one could ever feel safe on Pluto.

Interplanet men were unloading crates from the ship and transferring them to a cage which dropped sheer into the rock face. Cazalet shifted his feet and fumed. He was not used to being ignored and, so far, no-one had taken the slightest notice of him.

Two figures emerged from the cage and sauntered casually towards the ship. The older of the two called out:

"Anything for Starship?"

Someone jerked a thumb to indicate Cazalet.

"Only him!"

Russell Cazalet glared. It was time he exerted himself, showed them he was a man to be reckoned with. He stalked up to the two men and brandished his papers in their faces.

"I'm Cazalet," he said. "I shall be taking over Project Star-Ship. Earth government thinks you're not going ahead fast enough and I'm here to direct work."

The older man nodded.

"I expected they'd send someone else soon. You're not the first by many. I'm Sutherland, the engineer in charge of the project. This is Jimmy Grant, one of my juniors."

The youngster had a fresh face and freckles and curly hair.

"Mrs. Cazalet?" Sutherland enquired, turning to Katherine. "We'll try to make you happy here — I'll ask my wife to call and show you the ropes. Not a pleasant place for the ladies, I'm afraid."

He placed his hand on Grant's shoulder and propelled him towards the ship.

"See to their luggage, Jimmy. I'll take them below."

The cage dropped vertically, at high speed. There was one lamp, but no chairs. Sutherland sat on a corner of one of the Interplanet crates.

Cazalet said: "What's the hold-up here? I want to get down to business right away."

Sutherland smiled. He had a round, ruddy face with a fringe of white hair.

"I thought you would . . . well, never mind. This isn't Earth. Conditions are different on Pluto. Take two or three days to settle in, then come and see me and I'll show you around."

His casual way of speaking brought a sharp response from Cazalet.

"I'll be at your office in two hours, Sutherland. I'll expect a complete report on work done and an explanation of the delay."

The cage stopped. A row of prefabricated bungalows laid out with geometric precision marked the residential area. Sutherland left them at

one and remarked that his wife would be calling later. He wandered off.

Katherine looked at her new home with a feeling of depression. She hadn't expected much, but the reality was even grimmer than she'd anticipated. The walls were bare, the paintwork faded; what furniture the two rooms contained was utilitarian to the point of stark necessity. There was nothing that might be considered decorative.

Two hours later, Cazalet presented himself at the engineer's office. Sutherland was out. He waited. He waited, with mounting impatience. Fifteen minutes passed. Thirty. Forty minutes. It became apparent that Sutherland was not coming; and it began to dawn on Russell Cazalet that he was being deliberately ignored.

On a planet which took two hundred and forty years to orbit the sun, the measurement of time was purely a formal convenience. They used a twenty-four hour clock. Early in the development of the colony, two twelve hour shifts had been instigated; but the arrival of the women-folk changed that.

No wife would ever be content with a system that left her husband no time to pay her the small attentions she craved. So the system switched to three eight-hour periods; work, sleep and recreation. The colony was divided into three shifts, enabling the work to proceed continuously.

Cazalet returned to his bungalow and found it in darkness; all lights were automatically turned off for the sleep period. Grumbling he went to bed.

He rose eight hours later and, with Katherine, followed the inhabitants of other bungalows to the communal dining hall. The meal was frugal; a cooked dish of vegetables, synthetic and tasteless; cheese, vitamin tablets; and a drink that looked like coloured water.

He returned to Sutherland's office, determined to get some action. He found the engineer talking to a middle-aged man with mongoloid features.

"Cazalet, our new executive — Professor Colby, who advises on scientific problems."

Colby had a distant manner, an air of abstraction. Cazalet had met the type before, and knew he'd have to deal firmly with the scientist.

"Gentlemen," he said briskly, "I'm here to complete Project Star-Ship in the shortest possible time, and I expect your full co-operation. Bring your problems to me and I'll solve them — that's always been

my system. I leave the details to others — planning is my job. Planning to get the right man on the right job at the right time. Planning for materials to be available. Planning to avoid bottle-necks."

Colby looked blank, so Cazalet said hurriedly:

"I shan't interfere with the scientific side. That's something I don't pretend to understand, I'm an executive. You've a job to do — my angle is to see that everything goes smoothly for you. That way we'll have the project completed in record time."

Sutherland coughed behind the back of his hand. At least, it sounded like a cough.

"Conditions aren't quite the same on Pluto as on Earth," he commented mildly. "You haven't been here long enough to appreciate the subtle difference that distance from Sol creates. Time loses most of its significance, out here at the edge of the system. There's no point in hurrying . . ."

Cazalet interrupted coldly.

"There's every point! You are behind schedule and the government on Earth insists on a speedy completion of the project. The stars are waiting to be conquered."

Colby said: "They were waiting centuries before we arrived on Pluto. They'll wait a while longer."

Cazalet frowned. He detected a certain lethargy in the attitude of both men.

"That won't do at all. What are the snags you've come up against? What is causing this delay?"

"There are *no* snags," Colby answered. "Everything is going according to plan. The Star-Ship will be built and it will work. There's nothing for you to do."

The silence was unhappy. Cazalet was unsure of his reaction to this last statement, and it was Sutherland who got him out of his difficulty.

"I've had an office prepared for you, Cazalet. And reams of figures. Progress charts and statistics, graphs and work schedules. You can bury yourself away and mug up the lot. That should keep you happy."

He led Cazalet to a room in the same building, threw open the door and pointed at a desk covered with papers.

"It's all yours," he said, and walked off.

Russell Cazalet sat down and felt peculiarly alone. The set-up on Pluto wasn't at all what he had expected. For a moment, it crossed his mind that Sutherland was trying to get rid of him, to keep him out

of the way. Then he looked at the pile of statistics on his desk and knew it wasn't so.

He had all the data relating to Project Star-Ship at hand. He began to plan his new schedule.

"I just had to come over and see you," said Lily Bates. The words gushed from her lips in a torrent of excitement. "It's so rarely we get first-hand news of Earth. I do hope you're settling in all right? Of course, it takes time to get used to conditions here but, as my husband always says, the human race is wonderfully adaptable."

Lily was the doctor's wife and, unlike her husband, seemed totally devoid of any reserve.

"I don't think I'll ever like Pluto," Katherine said.

She had been talking to Mrs. Sutherland and her nearest neighbour, a pretty woman who insisted on everyone calling her "Bubbles." It was a nickname that did not suit her.

"Well, *like* it, dear, that's hard to say," went on Lily breathlessly, "but I'm sure you'll get used to it in time. We all have, haven't we?" She appealed to the other two women but couldn't wait for an answer. "We're pioneers, you know, like those women who travelled west in covered wagons. I don't suppose they liked it at first, but they got used to it. Now you must tell us all about Earth . . ."

"Yes, do," implored Bubbles. "I want to hear about the new fashions."

"What I'm interested in," said Mrs. Sutherland, leaning forward in her chair, "is the arts. Is it true they've developed screens that bring the colour symphonies right into your home? When I left Earth — that was two years ago — the thing was only just beginning."

She was thin and forty, with bloodless lips and short-cropped hair.

"Oh yes," said Lily Bates, "you must tell us just *everything* that's going on back home. We're dying to know, aren't we, girls?"

Katherine felt bewildered. Memories of Earth were still fresh in her mind; it was Pluto she wanted to learn about. She had yet to grasp the subtle change which had come over the colonists. She began, haltingly, to tell them of the life she had so recently left . . . and they hung on her words, breathing them in as if they were the stuff of life.

So many things had changed on Earth since these women had left; they needed reassuring on countless points. Earth to them was a dream, not quite real.

Katherine's clothes were admired — the height of fashion it must seem, though to her they were very ordinary. But then the dresses

here appeared comic, styles which had disappeared from Earth and been forgotten. It was like moving back in time.

"Some plastic material?" Bubbles enquired, running the hem of Katherine's dress between her fingers.

"Yes, it's called *Drilene*. A waterproof material, so one doesn't need a coat for wet weather."

"Well, there's no rain on Pluto," interjected Lily with some satisfaction.

That was another thing Katherine found difficult to accept; the total absence of weather. The colony, being enclosed, enjoyed an even climate, at a temperature which made possible the wearing of minimum clothing.

Lily's gaze wandered to the window, and she exclaimed:

"There goes Mrs. Colby!"

Katherine saw a dark-skinned beauty with an hour-glass figure. She wore a short white skirt and blouse with sandals.

"She's no better than she ought to be," Lily said with a sniff. "Some women don't know how to behave — but what can you expect, when her husband is a good fifteen years older? All the same, I'd like to know . . ."

Bubbles kicked her ankle suddenly, and she stopped. Mrs. Sutherland's lips were tight-pressed as she looked at the floor. Katherine began to understand. Human emotions were the same, whether on Earth or Pluto . . .

She changed the subject swiftly.

"Aren't you afraid that some catastrophe will wipe out the colony? So many things could happen. It seems to me . . ."

"That's something we don't talk about," interrupted Lily Bates. "It's better not to think about what might happen."

A tension linked the group of women. For a moment, all were conscious of their precarious position, aware of the tremendous natural forces held at bay by slender technical resources — forces which could destroy them utterly. Nature held a sword of Damocles perpetually over their heads.

Then Bubbles laughed and the tension broke.

"Perhaps it's as well," she said, "that Mrs. Colby gives us something to gossip about."

Russell Cazalet sat in his office. Before him was the new work schedule. He looked at it and felt satisfied. The material was available, the men too. Time was the only factor that worried him — and he

was convinced that a speed-up was possible. It only needed a little juggling with the shifts, more production per man-hour and Project Star-Ship would be completed on schedule.

He was very happy about it.

He pressed a bell-push, and waited. He waited one minute, two — three minutes. Then, frowning, he pushed the button again. He was not used to waiting; on Earth, when he pressed a button, someone answered it, and fast.

Five minutes passed. Cazalet pushed back his chair and went to the door. He opened it and looked down the corridor. Two white-coated men were talking in a doorway along the passage. One of the men was Sutherland.

Cazalet demanded: "Didn't you hear me ring?"

The engineer looked at him, shrugged at his companion, and walked up to Cazalet.

"What is it now?"

"I've just completed the new schedule," Cazalet said "My figures show we can finish to time."

"That's fine." Sutherland's tone showed no particular enthusiasm. "Fine," he repeated.

Cazalet picked up some papers from his desk and thrust them at the engineer.

"Just look through these and see if you agree," he said.

Sutherland flipped the pages, then put them into his pocket.

"I'll do that," he agreed. "I'll read 'em tonight and let you know."

He started to walk away. Cazalet stared at his back, taken by surprise, then shouted angrily:

"There's some hurry about this job you know!"

The engineer didn't stop.

"Damned impertinence," Cazalet said under his breath. He went into his office and picked up a copy of the new schedule. Colby's office was down the passage. He stalked in.

"Colby —"

His words hung on the air. The office was empty.

Swearing, Cazalet returned to the corridor. He saw the man Sutherland had been talking to, a junior member of the staff.

"Where can I find Professor Colby?" he asked.

"I expect he's over at the Interplanet labs."

"Interplanet?" Cazalet didn't understand. Colby was a government man. "What's he doing there?"

The youngster shrugged indifferently.

"Dammit, answer me!" Cazalet roared. "It's time you people recognised my authority . . . I'm in charge here!"

"Yes, sir, sorry, sir, can I take a message to the professor for you?"

"Tell him," Cazalet said grimly, "to report to my office."

He returned to his desk and sat down to wait. He was resolved to make a stand; he would not chase the scientist — Colby must come to him. He prepared to wait it out.

After a few minutes, he opened a tin and placed an indigestion tablet in his mouth. Synthetic vegetables, he decided, did not agree with him. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the flavour of the tablet as it dissolved.

An hour passed. Cazalet began to feel irritated. It should not have taken all that time for Colby to show up. He went to the door again, and hunted for the young man who had gone to deliver his message. He found him at last, reading a magazine.

"Well?" Cazalet rumbled. "Did you see Professor Colby?"

"Yes, sir. He said he was busy, and that he would call on you later."

Cazalet breathed hard. This was flagrant disobedience on Colby's part; he began to suspect a deliberate campaign to ignore his orders. Abruptly, he turned on his heels and stalked off.

At his desk again, he took another indigestion tablet, and placed his hands palm down on the desk-top, waiting for their trembling to subside. He wondered: Were they *all* mad on Pluto?

On her way back from the laundry, Katherine passed the laboratories of Interplanet Chemicals. Time hung heavily on her hands for she had little to do; food was prepared and served at a communal kitchen; the bungalow took very few minutes to clean; and her washing was done by machinery. Cazalet she hardly saw.

She stopped to look at the I.C. building, and thought she recognised the slim young man who left by the main door. She stared in surprise. Surely Jimmy Grant should be working on Project Star-Ship?

He came up to her.

"Hello, Mrs. Cazalet. Can I carry your bundle for you?"

He was a nice boy, Katherine thought. She surrendered her laundry with a smile.

"Thank you, Jimmy."

They walked a while in silence, then Katherine asked:

"What were you doing in the laboratories?"

He did not reply immediately, but shot her an embarrassed glance. Then he laughed nervously.

"I suppose I might as well tell you — Mr. Cazalet is bound to find out sooner or later. I work there . . . doing Interplanet work during government time! Everyone on the project does, from Sutherland and Colby down to the juniors."

When Katherine did not comment, he continued with more assurance.

"Do you know that the wages paid by Interplanet are ten times what we government workers on the project get? There was a lot of ill-feeling about that at first, but it blew over. You can imagine the sort of thing — we were I.C.'s 'poor relations.'"

"Time changed that. Interplanet were making simply colossal profits, and needed more workers. They couldn't get them because the colony can only support a certain number of people, and the original agreement stated that fifty per cent of the staff must be working on Project Star-Ship.

"So Interplanet offered to take us on part-time — and pay more than we get from the government! After all, there's no hurry about building the ship; it'll be finished one day and, meanwhile, we're making extra money for the time when we return to Earth."

Katherine wondered what her husband would have to say about that when he found out.

She said: "But you're not a chemist, Jimmy."

"That doesn't matter. You see, there's a lot of routine work anyone can do — and that frees the Interplanet staff for developing new cultures. Their production has gone up by half since the new scheme started."

While the Star-Ship project fell behind schedule and Cazalet had to come out to see what the trouble was. Katherine smiled faintly.

"No-one back on Earth even suspects what is going on," said Jimmy Grant. "Interplanet sees to that! They're on a good thing, all right. I blame the government — they should pay us more money. I'm saving up to get married. When I get back to Earth . . ."

He stopped, a worried expression on his face.

"A spaceship calls here twice a month, and there's always been some letters for me, till this time. I wish I knew what was happening, Mrs. Cazalet. Do you think my girl's got tired of waiting?"

Katherine had it on the tip of her tongue to say that any girl would do well to wait for him. She liked Jimmy Grant. Instead, she said carefully:

"It isn't saving a lot of money that will make your girl happy. It's having you beside her. If I were you, I'd work harder at getting the Star-Ship finished and getting back to Earth."

He looked at her, startled.

"I hadn't thought of it like that."

They walked on till they reached Katherine's bungalow. Jimmy Grant handed her the bundle of laundry and turned away. As he left, he said:

"I think I'll take your advice, Mrs. Cazalet."

Katherine watched him till he was out of sight, a satisfied smile on her lips. She, too, wanted to get back to Earth. She went inside the bungalow, wondering if her husband was going to find it as easy to convince the other workers on Project Star-Ship that they were wasting their time in Interplanet's laboratories.

Katherine had never seen Cazalet so angry. His face was white, taut, and his hands trembled.

"I'm helpless," he said bitterly, "helpless! No-one takes the slightest notice of what I say and there's nothing I can do about it."

"Oh, I expect you'll think of something," Katherine said.

Cazalet paced the bungalow wringing his hands.

"It's a fantastic situation — I've never met anything like it before. I worked out a new schedule. Sutherland and Colby smiled politely, and ignored it — they're making no attempt to put my plan into operation. God knows when the Star-Ship will be finished; I don't."

She suppressed a smile. It would be a new experience for her husband to feel ignored.

"You'll find a way," she said gently. "You always have in the past."

"On Earth," Cazalet fumed. "Yes. It's different there; men naturally work at high pitch — and I could always go to a higher authority. If needs be, I could have malcontents replaced. Here, that's impossible, because of the time factor. Two months before a ship calls, five months to reach Earth — and another five back. Don't you see, my hands are tied? I'm on my own and no-one takes me seriously!"

Katherine did see. One of her husband's colleagues, back on Earth, had explained it to her:

"Russ is a good executive," he'd said, "but he makes a mistake in sticking so close to his desk. I don't know anyone better at planning a work schedule, but when it comes to handling men, he just doesn't know how. He needs to get out of his office more. Oh sure, he gets by — so long as he has some one to carry out his orders, and some one above him to see that they are carried out. But if he's ever in a position where he's strictly on his own . . . well, I don't think he'll make it stick."

He's in that position now, Katherine thought. He can handle facts and figures, but not men. Conditions on Pluto had him at a disadvantage.

"You'd think we had all the time in the world," Cazalet complained, "that orders from Earth don't mean a thing. I've never come across a project before where the men take the job so leisurely. It's like a disease, this lethargy that spreads through the colony."

He ground his teeth.

"I can't afford to fail, Kate. My whole future is at stake, the project must be finished to time. I'm convinced it could be — my new schedule will take care of the delay. But they won't work harder! I don't understand it . . ."

He swung round on her, snapping:

"There's another side to this. Government men are working for Interplanet! Wasting valuable time and material on producing artificial hormones for fat old roués who want to feel young again. It's incredible. Everyone does it, even Sutherland and Professor Colby . . . for the money, I suppose. Interplanet pay well. If there were some way to let Earth know what is going on here, but there isn't — not within a reasonable time. It would take a year — a whole year — to get the staff replaced, and the project is supposed to be finished before that!"

Katherine thought of Jimmy Grant. If she could persuade other men by similar means . . . her thoughts raced . . . perhaps she could help her husband with his problem. But he mustn't know about it. She must make it seem that *he* had worked the miracle.

Cazalet scowled suddenly.

"You seem to be taking it very calmly, Kate. Don't you understand, I'm ruined if I can't complete this job on time? Doesn't that worry you?"

She smiled back at him.

"You'll do it, Russ. I've tremendous confidence in you."

He grunted and, wearying of his pacing, slumped into a chair.

"How? Just tell me that, Kate."

She moved across to him and ruffled his hair with her fingers, kissed him lightly on the forehead.

"Stop worrying it, Russ. You'll find a way — somehow . . ."

Russell Cazalet stared blindly in front of him, for the first time in his life without that complacency which was second nature to him.

The vault of the underground colony was black rock, thousands of tons of it. Looking upwards, Katherine felt depressed by the view,

and not a little frightened. She could not help imagining what would happen if that rock mass began to shift . . .

She walked quickly, as if, somehow, that might save her. Beyond Interplanet's laboratories and the pile which made life possible on Pluto, she saw the tunnel which housed the Star-Ship.

The tunnel burrowed upwards through the rock at a gentle gradient. She saw the beginning of the ramp, and the enormous bulk of the ship. It towered above her, a quarter of a mile high, gleaming metal and cavernous openings for the rocket jets.

Sutherland came to greet her.

"Hello, Mrs. Cazalet — nice to see you here. Come aboard and I'll show you round."

She climbed after him, up the steel ladder and into the belly of the monster. A circular corridor sloped away to a distant point of light.

"The main corridor is two miles long," Sutherland said, "that gives you some idea of the size of the ship. Nothing like it has been built before, but then, we're now dealing with interstellar distances. We have to plan for a long trip, years in fact. The Star-Ship is built to carry whole families and to enable them to be self-sufficient."

They began the long walk up the corridor, the engineer stopping to show her points of interest.

"The Star-Ship will be, in effect, a completely self-contained world of its own. Our aim is to provide as normal an environment for the travellers as possible, and, to that end, we have built into the ship a hospital and school, a theatre and swimming bath in addition to the necessities of life."

He pulled Katherine into an alcove as a heavily loaded truck drove past.

"The power unit is a development of the atomic rocket we use on normal spaceships, the raw material for the pile being water. Living quarters are not single cabins, but units designed to contain a family. Food will be partly in concentrated form, partly natural — we have incorporated a hydroponic garden to provide fresh vegetables.

"Used air will be chemically reconditioned. We have repair shops and laboratories — and an important piece of research equipment in the form of a hundred-inch telescope. The store room contains everything necessary for setting up a colony on the planet of some distant sun . . ."

Katherine was awed despite her natural aversion for the Star-Ship. She had read about it on Earth and seen a scaled model — but the reality left her breathless. A ship two miles long — a self-supporting environment — human beings transported across the awful void between stars.

Sutherland said, casually: "You begin to see now why we on Pluto

are in no hurry? Those on Earth do not *live* with the thing — they see it only as figures on paper. The reality eludes them. What is time, a few months — even a few years — one way or the other, compared with the distances this ship will know? Time becomes utterly meaningless when you think of —”

He stopped, looking at her, smiling.

“ You *do* see, don't you? ”

Katherine said nothing. At that moment, she had no words to express her feelings. She shared a dream that men had known since the first of our race lifted his eyes to the night sky — a dream that would soon become reality. There was a great pride in her, mixed up with a feeling of humility — even a little fear.

“ The really interesting thing about this trip,” Sutherland said, “ is whether or not we'll encounter another intelligent race. Suppose we do . . . a race that has developed along different lines to us, perhaps so far past us in achievement as to make us look like babes-in-arms confronted by our great-great grandfather!

“ Think what a revelation that would be. What effect it might have on our arts and sciences, our politics and morals . . . perhaps such a contact would be the making of us. That is how I like to think of the Star-Ship — as a bridge between racial adolescence and maturity.”

Interplanet's offices were brightly lit and highly organized. There was an air of efficiency about the place.

Cazalet sat sternly upright on the edge of his chair and stared in front of him with marked disinterest. He was determined not to show his feelings. There was no lethargy here, a startling contrast to the office block in his own department. His lips pressed into a grim line and his eyebrows locked in a frown.

Was it the extra money, he wondered — or the shorter period of duty on Pluto? Or was the difference in attitude of the workers on Project Star-Ship due to some more subtle influence? He did not know.

He was alone in the waiting-room and he was tired of waiting. He had not wanted to come here, but he did not see what else he could do. Presently, the receptionist returned from the inner room, and said:

“ Mr. Brooks will see you now.”

Cazalet went in. Brooks, Director of I. C. research on Pluto, stepped forward with his hand extended, smiling.

“ Sorry to keep you waiting, Cazalet. We're tremendously busy at the moment — a new demand for hormones from Earth. They want production stepped up by a further ten per cent.”

He stopped smiling when Cazalet did not take his hand.

"You wanted to see me about a job, I suppose?"

"A job? Me?" Cazalet stared blankly, taken by surprise.

"We can't offer you anything specialized, of course, but there's plenty of routine work to be done, if you don't mind that. I expect you've heard that we pay well —"

"Damn you!" Cazalet exploded. "I didn't come here to be insulted."

Brooks stiffened. He was a young man, with a pink face and sharp features. A hard look came into his eyes.

"Just *why* did you come here, Mr. Cazalet?" he said icily.

"To demand that you release my workers from your laboratories. Project Star-Ship is behind schedule and I will not have my men taken away from their jobs. You will either discharge every project worker this minute — or I shall report you to Earth!"

Brooks returned to his desk and sat down. He looked at Cazalet silently, summing him up. He took his time about it, and when he spoke again, the smile had come back.

"I see," he said quietly.

Cazalet waited. The interview was not going as he had hoped; Brooks was not a man to be panicked into action.

"The men from Project Star-Ship are here of their own free will. We offered them an agreement — they accepted. There's no pressure put on them." Brooks paused. "As for Earth — well, it takes a long time to get a report through. Even longer to get action taken."

"You can't keep this secret for ever," Cazalet said grimly. "And when the government does learn the truth, that'll be the end of Interplanet Chemicals on Pluto. I'll bargain with you — return my men now and I'll say nothing. I can still get my work done to time."

"Nothing doing, Cazalet!" Brooks laughed. "You seem to underestimate Interplanet — your threat is an empty one. Consider the profits we make . . . don't you think that gives us some pull on Earth? And—"

"I'll expose you!" Cazalet snapped. "The government —"

"The government will do nothing. Confidentially, some of our best customers for artificial hormones are members of the government! Think that over. Do you suppose they'll cut off their own supplies for some crazy project to reach the stars? Not if I know human nature —"

Cazalet suddenly felt old. His bluff had failed, and there was nothing more he could do. He stood a moment, looking at the I.C. man without seeing him, then swung round and moved for the door.

Brooks called after him.

"You can still have a job if you want one. We're badly understaffed and need . . ."

Cazalet slammed the door on his way out. The spectre of failure haunted him. Confidence oozed out of him. His past successes counted for nothing now . . . he must return to Earth and admit defeat. The future he dreamed for himself slipped through his fingers. Ruin! Back to a desk and some humble position, waiting to be pensioned off.

"So nice of you to come, Mrs. Colby," Katherine said with a smile.

"Call me Pat — everyone else does."

Pat Colby sank into a chair and crossed her legs. Katherine measured out two small glasses of gin and handed one to her visitor.

"Here's luck," said Mrs. Colby, and drained her glass rapidly. She smacked her lips. "I should have called before — I suppose you get an extra ration, being the executive's wife? It's hell on Pluto, with liquor at a premium. Makes me wish I was back on Earth."

Katherine refilled her glass.

"I wonder you came at all," she commented. "You hardly seem the type."

Mrs. Colby gave a brittle laugh.

"Don't worry about me, Kate — I'm a girl who can look after herself. What's a few years' hardship, after all? When I get back to Earth, Colby will have enough to keep me in luxury for the rest of my life . . ."

She tossed back the gin again.

"Anyway, I have a good time . . . as I expect you've heard! This place is too damned small for a woman like me to keep her reputation. Not that I mind what they say. I get what I want the only way I can."

Her eyes fixed on Katherine's face in a bold challenge, daring her to make any expression of disapproval.

"I don't listen to rumours," Katherine said quietly, determined to be friendly. She had a use for Mrs. Colby.

"Oh, it's true enough."

I dare say, Katherine thought. Pat Colby's beauty was blatantly sensual and her two-piece dress both brief and tight; she had a body that any man might desire, a smooth dark skin and sultry eyes. Her movements had all the controlled liteness of a cat.

"I expect you'll be glad to reach Earth again," Katherine murmured.



Hunter

"You bet I will! The trouble with Pluto is there's no night-life . . ."

She's much too young for Colby, Katherine thought, she needs excitement. But she was clever; she could twist Colby round her little finger — probably he did not even guess what everyone else in the colony knew for a fact. The professor was too absorbed in his work.

"My husband has worked out a new schedule for the Star-Ship," she said. "If the men worked harder, we could all get back to Earth that much quicker."

Pat Colby looked at her intently; she was intelligent as well as beautiful.

"Meaning what exactly?"

"I think we women could do something to speed up our departure. Behind every successful man . . . you know the theory."

"I might influence my husband, if that's what you mean." Mrs. Colby was thoughtful. "I guess we've all been taking things too easily here, but then, it's difficult to appreciate the passage of time so far from Earth. It would be nice to get back."

Katherine said: "Sutherland is the key man."

Pat Colby uncrossed her legs and sat upright, staring at her. For an instant, there was fury in her dark eyes; it passed, and she relaxed again. There was a new respect in her voice when she spoke.

"And I thought you were still wet behind the ears! Really, Kate, you're harder than I am. I wouldn't have had the nerve to say a thing like that."

Katherine leant forward, her pulse quickening. It was all she could do to prevent a blush deepening her colour.

"Sutherland sets the pace on Project Star-Ship — and I don't doubt that you could influence him. All it needs is for the men to stick to Russ's new schedule."

Pat Colby rose, laughing.

"You make it sound easy, Kate. Well, I'll see what I can do . . . it would be nice to see Earth again." She paused in the doorway "I wondered why Jimmy Grant had suddenly stopped work at Interplanet; now I'm beginning to get the idea. Luck, Kate!"

The door banged behind her.

The nursery was part-playroom, part-school, and the women took it in turn to watch over the very young children. Katherine always felt uneasy with children, not because she disliked them but because they always reminded her that she could never know parenthood. She

had to steel herself to enter the nursery.

She had chosen a time when she knew that Mrs. Garforth would be on duty. Garforth was the deputy chief engineer, second only to Sutherland, an important man on Project Star-Ship. His wife was tall and thin and wore a perpetually harassed expression; they had two children, a girl of three and a boy of five.

The boy was swinging from the rope and making yodelling noises while Mrs. Garforth watched apprehensively. She was one of those women who felt sure that their children were permanently ailing.

"Tommy looks as if he could do with some sunshine," Katherine said casually. "He's rather pale isn't he?"

Mrs. Garforth looked anxiously at Tommy.

"Do you think so? He gets his full time in the sun chamber."

"It's not quite the same thing, is it? I mean, the ultra-violet lamps are fine for building up vitamin D, but that's not the only consideration surely?"

"I don't quite see what you mean, Mrs. Cazalet."

"Oh, there's so much more goodness in *real* sunshine. It seems a pity you can't send them both to Earth —"

"I couldn't bear to be parted from them — and George would never agree. It would be . . . Tommy! Stop that at once — come down before you hurt yourself."

He slid down the rope at a speed which must have warmed his hands. Mrs. Garforth went quickly to inspect his hands; she fussed over him like a broody hen.

"Then there's the effect of a different atmosphere, a different gravity," Katherine said. "I'm sure it's not good for the children. The quicker they get back to Earth the better for them."

"I'm sure you're right," Mrs. Garforth sighed. "But there doesn't seem much hope, does there?"

"My husband has worked out a new schedule to complete the Star-Ship to time. It only requires the men to work a little harder."

Mrs. Garforth looked doubtful.

"Education is difficult here, too," Katherine remarked. "I suppose you want your son to go to a university?"

"Of course! George says . . . Tommy, stop bullying your little sister like that. Play with her nicely."

"Don't like girls," Tommy sulked.

"Children on Earth have so many advantages. With the places at University so restricted, it seems unfair not to give the little ones the best possible chance from the beginning — and basic training is so important I always think."

"I suppose so, but I don't quite see —"

"I'm sure your husband will understand," Katherine said. "The project can be finished to time if the men work Russell's schedule — and we can all get back to Earth."

Mrs. Garforth sighed again.

"That *would* be nice. Sometimes I think I'll have a nervous breakdown if I have to stay here much longer."

"A good school for the children," Katherine repeated, "and a normal environment. So much better than living underground on synthetic food. I should think they'd pick up in no time."

Mrs. Garforth looked carefully at Tommy and Susan. She had a wonderful imagination.

"I see what you mean, Mrs. Cazalet. It would be best if they went back to Earth without delay. I'll speak to George tonight."

Susan began to cry.

"I don't feel well, mummy . . . I've got a pain."

Mrs. Garforth flew.

Katherine left the nursery feeling pleased. She had deliberately refrained from keeping her voice down and several other mothers had heard the conversation. She walked back to the bungalow with a light step. She would not be surprised if some of the men on Project Star-Ship found their wives suddenly interested in when the job would be finished. Perhaps even Russell would notice the difference in their attitude.

Jimmy Grant . . . Pat Colby . . . Mrs. Garforth. It was a start, but she had a lot to do yet if she were to get the Star-Ship finished on schedule.

A siren wailed.

"Routine test," announced a mechanical voice over the warning system. "Routine test only."

Katherine looked at her wrist-watch as she ran for shelter. Three minutes was the prescribed time, it would take three minutes for the air to rush into space if a severe crack developed in the roof of the colony.

She saw other women hurrying from their bungalows. Work stopped at Interplanet and on the Star-Ship; this weekly test was something that everyone took seriously. One day, the lives of all might depend on the efficiency of the emergency plan.

Katherine reached the nearest air-tight building and passed quickly through the lock. She checked her watch again; two-and-three-quarter minutes. She was panting for breath — and hoped that she would never need to run in earnest.

She found herself in a circular building with its own air-supply and

food store; there were benches round the wall and she moved to a vacant space and sat down. The room was half-full of women and more arrived after Katherine.

Bubbles came across and struck up a conversation.

"How do you like Pluto now, Kate?"

"I don't think I'll ever really like it," Katherine answered. "The colony is a wonderful achievement, of course, but life here is too close to the existence level. When I think of all the little luxuries I knew on Earth . . ."

Bubbles sighed ecstatically.

"Tell us about it, Kate!"

A small knot of women formed about them. It was an unconscious drift towards the latest arrival from the Earth. At first, Katherine had thought her popularity due to the fact of her being the executive's wife; she knew better now — there was a deep, instinctive desire on the part of the colonists to learn what was happening back home.

She launched into reminiscence.

"We miss such a lot out here. Fashions for instance — dress fashions change so swiftly on Earth. Just before I left, we were wearing a most exciting style . . ."

Through the window, Katherine saw men in face-masks, oxygen-cylinders on their backs, going about the business of pretending to locate and repair air leaks. The test was thorough. She could see the deserted streets of the residential area and the next air-tight building in the chain which stretched across the colony.

"And, of course, we had the new colour screens in our homes. I won't try to describe the latest works of Lhoté — you'll see them for yourselves when you get back. On TV, a new family serial was just starting . . . the Robinson's, a story featuring a hydroponics farmer and his wife.

"There's a craze for the new jewellery too, made from Martian quartz — it looks something like coral and has the most fantastic natural formations."

Katherine held her audience. She had complete silence and every woman in the room hung on her words.

"Summer had come when I left for Pluto — that's what I miss most. Lazing on the beach in hot sunshine, a bright blue sky overhead. Or speeding through the water on an electric surf-board . . . that's another sport which will be new to you.

"There are so many things, I could go on for hours. The radiations baths attached to all power piles. Excursions to the holiday centre on Space Station One. The wonderful new paintings by Simes

— everyone who is anyone has a facsimile of his *Night Sky on Dione*.

"Then there's the new Frigi-food. So many lovely delicacies that —"

The siren sounded again.

"Test completed," announced the mechanical voice, and the women began to think about resuming normal life. Katherine's audience thinned out.

"But you'll experience it all at first hand very soon now," she finished. "My husband's new schedule means that we'll all be back on Earth much sooner than anyone expected. It'll be worth working a bit harder . . ."

She went back through the air-lock with Bubbles.

I'm going to stop my husband wasting his time with Interplanet," Bubbles said. "I can't wait to get home again!"

Russell Cazalet plotted figures on a graph with the air of a man who was not quite sure whether he was awake or dreaming. He had some difficulty in believing the results he obtained. It was preposterous. According to statistics, Project Star-Ship was racing ahead at a speed which meant the work would be finished well before schedule . . .

He checked the work-sheets again. No mistake was possible — if the figures were true, the Star-Ship would be completed to time and he could return to Earth in triumph. It was a thought that left him a little dazed.

What happened to cause this miracle? The lethargy that hung over the colony seemed to have disappeared as if it never existed. Unless . . . unless the figures had been "cooked" for his benefit! He grew angry then — that must be it. Sutherland and Colby were trying to pull the wool over his eyes by faking the progress reports.

He pushed back his chair and rose from the desk. His breath came quickly. There was one way to learn the truth — visit Star-Ship and take a look for himself. He left his office and walked rapidly between the buildings, in the direction of the tunnel.

It was the first time he had been anywhere near the Star-Ship, but he had no difficulty in finding it. A line of trucks plied back and forth between the store-sheds and the work area. The sound of ringing metal, the blended, bustling noises of men busy about their jobs came to him on the still air.

He reached the tunnel where it began to slope upwards to the surface of Pluto. The ship was impressive; even Cazalet had to admit that. He was familiar with it in statistical form, but the reality was

something he had not envisaged.

It towered over him, curving metal walls and the large diameters of rocket jets; a cylinder whose tapering nose was somewhere out of sight, a couple of miles away. He went up the swaying steel ladder and entered the circular corridor that stretched away through the length of the ship.

He commenced his inspection with a critical eye. Work was going on apace. He walked down the corridor, looking into one section after another, and wherever he looked, men were busily engaged in fitting and adjusting the hundreds of mechanisms that made up the Star-Ship.

Cazalet was astounded by the air of purpose with which the men worked. He saw no sign of slackness anywhere; and was soon in no doubt that the figures he had plotted on his graph bore a true relation to the progress of the ship. He was pleased . . . and puzzled.

He retraced his steps and came upon Sutherland and Garforth as they left the power room. The chief engineer beamed on Cazalet and said:

"Hello, there. Checking up on us?" He waved a bunch of papers in Cazalet's face. "Here's some more figures for you — we've just completed a first test on the atomic pile. It behaved beautifully."

Garforth, a squat, bulky man, grunted: "You'll soon have to make out a new schedule to keep up with us."

Cazalet fumbled for words to mask his surprise at the change in the two men.

"I'm glad it's going well," he said. "Let me know if I can be of assistance."

They passed on, Sutherland waving cheerfully.

Cazalet left the Star-Ship and started back to his office. His head was in a whirl. Brooks, the I.C. director intercepted him, smiling the smile of a man who wants something badly.

"Ah, Cazalet — there you are! I was wondering if you could help . . . a rather unorthodox request but — " He spread his hands to indicate that he was no longer master of the situation. "It's like this: since your men left the laboratories, production has fallen heavily — and Earth is demanding an increased supply of hormone. I appreciate you have your job to do, that the Star-Ship is important, but — "

"What do you want?" Cazalet said curtly.

Brooks swallowed hard.

"If we could come to some arrangement, say ten per cent of your staff to work for Interplanet two hours each shift. Naturally you would be — er — substantially rewarded. Can I count on your help?"

"No," said Russell Cazalet with considerable satisfaction.

Katherine blossomed like a flower in Spring. For the first time since she had married, she was no longer simply "Cazalet's wife"; she knew the pleasure that comes from doing something that no-one else could have done. She was helping her husband in his career.

Secretly, of course. She could not come out into the open, though the temptation to do so, at times, was almost overwhelming. Where Russell's methods had failed, she was succeeding with a woman's wiles. She began to compare herself with Cleopatra and Josephine and the Empress Theodora . . .

The Star-Ship rapidly approached completion and she would soon be back on Earth. She was happier than she could ever remember being before. She enquired regularly after the ship's progress, and was careless enough to refer to the sudden burst of zeal on the part of the project workers as "our" success.

Russell Cazalet grew morose. He had hardly a word to say for himself nowadays. At meal-times, he would sit across the table from her, silent, watching her with an expression she had not seen before. A strange expression, compounded of anger and apprehension at this new revelation of his wife's character . . . he was learning something about her he had not even suspected. He was not pleased; Cazalet was a man who firmly believed that his wife should remain in the background.

He returned to the bungalow one day, his cheeks burning and a cold, hard look in his eyes.

"Damn you, Kate! Why couldn't you keep your nose out of my business? I'd have found a way to overcome this lethargy in time — you had no right to interfere. You've placed me in an absolutely intolerable position."

Katherine was shaken, but did her best to remain calm.

"I was trying to help you," she said.

Cazalet glared resentfully at her, his hands clenched. For a moment, she thought he was going to strike her — but he only laughed bitterly.

"Do you know what the men are calling me? *Kate's husband!* How do you think I like that? I'm the laughing stock of the whole colony . . ."

Katherine was thrilled — and dismayed. Russell's pride was hurt and that meant he would be difficult to deal with. She forced a smile and went up to him, laying her hand on his arm.

"Russ, dear —"

He shook her off.

"Leave me alone!"

"I wanted to help, Russ. You said you felt helpless to do the job — and I saw a way of helping. I didn't intend to hurt you. After all, you worked out the schedule to complete the Star-Ship on time; I only persuaded them to work longer hours."

He snorted angrily.

"That's all. You only did my job for me . . . that's what everyone on Pluto is saying." His tone changed abruptly, and he stared at her as if seeing her for the first time. "Though I'm damned if I understand how you've done it!"

Katherine said: "You're taking this thing too seriously, Russ. Anyway, you couldn't have managed it —"

"That's nice to know!"

"No man could. I had to persuade the other women to work on their husbands —"

"And Mrs. Colby to seduce Sutherland!"

"She was his mistress before we landed here. Didn't you know? I thought everyone did — except the professor."

Russell Cazalet stared grimly at his wife.

"You're not the girl I married. Something's changed you, Kate, and I don't like the change. I don't like it at all."

Katherine breathed hard.

"I think you might show a little gratitude — after all, I have saved your career! Project Star-Ship will be another success for you. When you return to Earth in glory, you can be quite sure that my part in it will soon be forgotten."

Cazalet's face turned white.

"Do you think I'll forget it so easily. Kate's husband . . . that will be the label I take back home . . . *Kate's husband!*"

He wheeled about, trembling, and stalked out of the bungalow.

He's just like a baby, Katherine thought.

She looked over the top of the magazine she could not concentrate on reading, and watched Cazalet moving about the bedroom. It was three days since he had spoken to her.

Really, she thought, this is absurd — two people can't live in the close confines of a prefab and not speak to each other. The position is intolerable.

What was he doing now? She could not quite determine his movements beyond the half-open door; it looked as if he were throwing shirts

and socks into a case. At first, she had tried to make conversation, but his surly silence soon discouraged her. Then she put on the superior air of a mother with a sulky child.

Her temper began to fray. He had no right to treat her like this . . .

She felt a sense of alarm stir deep inside her. Russell had never been as difficult as this before. His manner was cold, distant, and she had the uneasy feeling that they were growing apart. A tremor of fear passed through her — if they didn't break the barrier between them soon, it would be too late to patch up the quarrel. The gulf was widening.

She threw down her magazine and went to the door of the bedroom. Her gaze darted about the room; yes, he *was* packing a case.

"Let's both stop being stupid," she said. "After all, we've been married for five years. Surely we're sufficiently intelligent to make up our difference?"

Russell Cazalet did not answer. He did not even look up. He ignored her, continuing to pack his case.

Katherine was nettled. "Going home to mother?" she asked humourlessly. "Be your age, Russ — there's nowhere you can go on Pluto. We're stuck with each other and we might as well make the best of it."

He snapped the lock on the case and put on his coat, walked past her into the living room.

Katherine snapped: "I'm fed up with this. What do you want me to do — apologise?" Her voice carried a note of hysteria. "All right . . . I'm sorry I did your job for you! I'm sorry you'll get promotion. I'm sorry you can't return to Earth a failure. I'm sorry —"

"*Shut up!*"

"Your first words in three days," Katherine said. "Thanks."

He was jealous of her success, she realized, he couldn't stand being pushed into the background. It was ironic that she, who had found it easy to persuade other women's husbands to do her bidding, should fail with her own.

He put down his case by the door and turned to look at her. There was no friendliness in his eyes, no love, only a coldness that made her want to cry out.

"I'm moving into my office for the rest of the time I have to stay on Pluto," he said calmly. "After our return to Earth, I shall live apart from you — you can keep the house and, of course, I'll make you an allowance. I think that's all I have to say . . . except that I shall not contest a divorce if you want one."

Katherine felt a hammering at her temples, as if the blood were

being drained from her.

"Russ! Don't —"

He was gone, the door closed on him.

"Oh, you fool," she said weakly. "You damn fool!"

She sat down automatically, her eyes misting. She had been too clever. She'd got what she wanted — at the price of her marriage. And the price, she began to realize, was too high . . .

She moved to the door to open it. Cazalet was walking quickly between the bungalows, his back to her, the case swinging in his hand. She began to laugh hysterically.

"Just like a small boy in a huff," she whispered. "A small boy running away from his home because he's been hurt . . . poor Russ, I should never have done that to him."

Then she couldn't see him any more for the tears that came unbidden to her eyes.

Overhead the rock shifted. Cracks appeared, zig-zagging like forked lightning and just as fast. There was a long rumbling sound as the tremor was transmitted through the colony. Great chunks of rock began to fall . . .

The siren screamed its warning note.

"EMERGENCY," roared a mechanical voice. "Emergency, Emergency, Emergency . . ."

Katherine ran. She did not stop to time herself. She would either reach the air-tight building or die —.

Sound welled up around her; the crunching, crashing noise of the avalanche of rock that came hurtling down; the uprush of air, a wind spurting into space; the screams of the injured, a banshee wail lifted high and carried away with the atmosphere; a mother desperately calling her children.

Katherine saw Cazalet ahead of her, running, still clutching his case. Another fall of rock — two bungalows swept away — an injured woman crawling across the ground, holding her bleeding head. No time to stop to help — anyone not inside an air-tight building in three minutes — two minutes — *one* minute — was past helping . . .

Katherine skidded on a loose stone. Sharp pain shot up her leg and she stumbled. *Don't panic*, ran the thought through her head, *mustn't panic*. If she turned her ankle, she was done for.

She slowed down. A man raced past her, panting, a small girl under his arm. Katherine went on again, more carefully now. Her ankle was going to be all right . . .

The air made a strange sighing sound as it thinned out. Breathing became difficult. Through a gaping hole in the roof she saw the stars,

glittering lights in the blackness. Her lungs were pounding.

She saw the airlock of the nearest emergency building and ran for it. Men and women passed through in quick succession. She joined them. The outer door closed, the inner door opened . . . *safe!*

The room was packed, every seat taken and people squatting on the floor. A babble of confused voices echoed; questions asked; babies cried. Katherine sank to the floor, exhausted, the aftermath of shock leaving her weak.

A few more men and women entered the building; then for a long time, the door of the air-lock remained shut. No-one else would be coming now. Outside, the air had gone from the colony and life could not exist. The survivors could only wait.

The chaos began to subside. One or two of the colonists took charge. Hot soup was handed round, a warning given:

"No unnecessary talking or moving about, please. We must conserve air. Owing to the destruction of two emergency buildings we are badly overcrowded — there is nothing we can do until a survey of the position is made. Just relax, sleep if you can."

They were huddled together, helpless, wondering what chance there was of rescue. There was time to think now that the initial numbness had worn off. A general moving round took place, husbands looking for wives, wives for children; families began to join up again.

In one corner, a woman cried softly to herself; she had just learned that her husband had died in the rock fall. A small girl kept asking for her baby brother . . . "Hush," said her mother, "he's safe in another building" — and prayed that were true.

Russell Cazalet sat on his up-ended suit case, too dazed to grasp the full enormity of the disaster. He waited for the siren to sound again, when he would continue to his office — the siren which would never sound again.

A man who had lost his wife and daughter walked through the airlock, carefully closing it after him . . .

Somebody ought to stand guard, Katherine thought; there's no need for useless sacrifices. No-one bothered about it, and no-one else walked outside.

Through the window, she watched a solitary figure, masked and equipped with an oxygen cylinder, pick his way between the rubble. Fantastic, Katherine thought, it's like watching a fish at the bottom of the sea. Unreal. The man passed from view.

After an hour, a message was broadcast over the cables linking the air-tight emergency buildings:

"Hello, everybody — Garforth speaking from number one hut.

The situation is bad. The extent of the roof fall makes any repair work impossible . . . this colony will never again be habitable in its present form. The only solution is to evacuate all personnel from Pluto . . ."

Katherine raised her head and looked across the crowded room; her eyes met — and held — Cazelet's.

Russell Cazelet had a strange premonition. It came upon him as Garforth's words echoed through his brain:

Repair work impossible . . . never again be habitable . . . evacuate Pluto . . .

It was a death sentence. One spaceship was due, but he doubted if they had enough air to last out till then. At any moment, more of the roof might fall and destroy the building which gave them life. There was the Star-Ship, of course — but that seemed remote. Anyway, there was no guarantee that it had not been damaged when the roof caved in.

The chances of survival seemed small. In the scales of existence, the forces of nature far outweighed the technology of men.

He faced death with a strange fear, sweating. Death, itself, he could not visualize . . . a word devoid of meaning. The fear which gnawed at him was the fear of loneliness. To wait for death to claim him — alone.

His conscious mind told him he was not alone, that he was in a room filled with people. He shared their predicament, and they his. Only there was no sharing . . . he was alone in his mind and the one person who could help him he had rejected.

Across the room, Katherine too, was alone.

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He knew a moment of guilt, of sympathy for her. He had brought her to Pluto and deserted her in her moment of greatest need. Perhaps they had only a few hours left . . . and she must wait, alone.

Around him, husbands and wives consoled each other, lost to the frightening reality in each other's arms. Cazalet's loneliness deepened; his gaze sought out the slight figure of his wife. Their eyes met, and her need of him was a naked, pitiful thing.

He knew, then, what it was he must do. He rose to his feet and threaded his way between sprawling limbs. Two children sat on the floor, scrawling with coloured chalks, blocking his way to her,

"Excuse me," he said politely, not taking his gaze of Katherine.

She watched him, her eyes lighting up, coming to life. He saw her again as she'd looked on their wedding day — her eyes had shone in the same way, he remembered. *Until death do us part*, ran the words in his head.

He stepped over the children and quickened his pace. They had not long together and they had need of each other. He reached her and dropped to the floor beside her.

"Kate —"

She placed a finger to his lips.

"There's no need to say anything, Russ."

He put his arms about her and she settled against his chest. Tears crawled down her cheeks; he kissed them away, and whispered:

"I love you, Kate."

The speaker crackled back to life again.

"Hello, everybody. This is Professor Colby speaking to you from the Star-Ship. First, let me assure you that the danger is past; an assessment of our position has been carried out and plans made to evacuate the colony.

"Many of you must be wondering what caused the disaster — the simple answer is heat. For centuries, Pluto has known only the freezing cold of outer space — a cold so intense that even the rock contracted. Our colony provided heat in the form of an atomic pile, and that heat has been seeping into planet around us. Local rock tried to expand — and stresses were set up, the result of which you all know . . .

"This colony is finished. Nothing can repair the loss of our roof. Even the plastic dome above the lift cages has been destroyed. Our casualties are heavy, particularly among the staff of Interplanet, whose laboratories were almost completely buried under the first fall of rock. The sympathy of us all must go to survivors who lost those dear to them."

Colby's voice was the only sound in the room. No-one stirred. Even

the children seemed to sense the drama of the disembodied voice which brought a promise of hope.

We have a limited number of space suits and a supply of oxygen cylinders, and distribution of these will start immediately. In small groups, you will leave your shelter and come to the Star-Ship . . . that is the good news I have for you. The Star-Ship has come through undamaged!"

"The ship is ready for flight and there is room for everybody, air and food and water in plenty. As soon as the last person is aboard, we will leave Pluto — *for Earth*."

As Colby's message ended, a cheer broke out. Tension eased and smiles came back again. The ordeal was over.

Katherine pointed through a window, to a masked man hauling a sled over the ground.

"They're coming for us, Russ," she said.

Russell Cazalet put one arm about his wife's shoulders and smiled down at her.

"It's going to be all right," he said. "It's going to be all right, Kate."

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An opinion of some new science-fiction books

From KENNETH F. SLATER

THE ROBOT AND THE MAN
edited by *Martin Greenberg*
(Grayson & Grayson), 9/6.

Ten tales about robots and men, as the title indicates, ranging from the satirical SELF PORTRAIT of Bernard Wolfe to the almost mystical and quietly beautiful INTO THY HANDS by Lester del Rey, in which mankind is reborn under the guidance of the robots who survived him. Humour is added by H. H. Holmes (Anthony Boucher) with ROBINIC, in which the small designer of the "usuform" robot comes into conflict with the great manufacturer of the humanoid robot, and to some extent is also present in Lewis Padgett's DEADLOCK, in which the theoretically indestructible and inquisitive robots are faced with the final problem — "How can I destroy me?"

Despite the fact that the ten stories are by different authors, were originally printed in different magazines at different times, their arrangement here has the effect of a chronological account of the effect of the robot on human history. An excellent addition to Grayson & Grayson's lengthy list of reprinted American anthologies.

CHILDREN OF THE ATOM
Wilmar H. Shiras (T. V. Boardman), 9/6.

Not infrequently magazine stories

told on a connected theme suffer the obvious fault of remaining connected magazine stories when placed between boards. It is my opinion that Miss Shiras' book about Peter Welles, psychiatrist, and Timothy Paul, superhero, can be truly called a "novel" as this fault is not apparent.

Timothy is sent to Welles by his school mistress, who suspects something is wrong with him . . . there is; his I.Q. is something way above any that can be registered by the standard tests! The first section of the book is devoted to the discovery by Welles of the truth about Paul, who has been "In Hiding"; Welles and Paul become fast friends. Then by "Opening Doors" they search for other children akin to Paul, and discover them; they plan the erection of a special "school for advanced children" in "New Foundations," and it is here that we leave the sections of the book which have appeared in the magazines. A little under half the book is new, "Problems," and "Children of the Atom" being titles given to the two new sections. These cover the running of the "school" and the conflict which ensues when a garbled story of these "giant, inhuman intellects" is released to the world through the mouth of Tommy Mundy, a sensation-seeking lay-preacher. The solution to the resultant problem

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concludes the story on a note of a new beginning.

Comparisons can be drawn between this and other stories of "mutations" and "supermen." For instance, it is in some way parallel to Stapledon's *ODD JOHN*; the children growing up estranged from humanity, their contacts with each other, the insane child, the group coming together. But Miss Shiras has dealt with the theme in a fashion entirely divergent. Her children are still children, with laughter and tears. A most readable and enjoyable novel.

THE CAVES OF STEEL *Isaac Asimov (T. V. Boardman), 9/6.*

This book fits someplace into Asimov's private Galactic History, shortly after the "Spacers" have remade contact with Earth. Those of humanity who remained on earth have developed a city culture of great complexity, and an agoraphobia. The Spacers, while refraining from contact in the physical sense with the Terrans, are trying to induce the city-people to make use of robots; the Terrans like neither the robots nor the "stand-offish" attitude of the Spacers.

Lije Bailey is a policeman; when a Spacer is unaccountably murdered, he is called in to take joint charge of the case with the representative of the Spacers. His colleague turns out to be R. Daneel Olivaw — the "R." standing for Robot!

Now, it becomes obvious that this is a detective story. There is some question whether in a "good" detective story it is necessary to keep the murderer hidden until the end. One school

of thought claims that this is required only in the "pulp-pot-boiler" style of writing, when the reader's interest can only be maintained (if at all) by that method. Well, that is the way it is done here, but I feel that Mr. Asimov would have found it difficult to handle in any other way, for with the solution of the murder comes the solution of the over-riding sociological problem, and the beginning of the reconciliation of the Spacers and the Terrans.

However, this is perhaps not one of Isaac Asimov's best stories. It is good, it shows his usual adequate workmanship, but somehow it does not quite come up to what I expect. Nevertheless, it is worth reading — it is far better than some other material currently available.

THE STARMEN *Leigh Brackett (Museum Press, 9/6).*

Miss Brackett is perhaps best known to the science fiction reader for her stories of heroes who, sword in one hand and blaster in the other, ride their spaceships down into all kinds of trouble and by sheer luck and brute force manage to rescue the heroine from a fate she usually deserves. *THE STARMEN*, while similar in many respects, is a little above the "sword and blaster" plane.

Michael Trehearne has traced his ancestry back to a village in Brittany, and while there finds some strange people who closely resemble him in outward appearance. He follows them, and discovers they are star-voyagers, trading throughout the worlds. They are the only race who can

withstand the rigours of space-flight. He takes a chance on his descent from earlier visitors—and by the fact that he does not die when the ship takes off proves he is of the same blood.

As in all races, there are various political factions, and Trehearne gets tangled with a party who desire to give space-flight to all races of the Galaxy—the “Vardda’s” immunity is artificial, although inherited, and the secret has been lost. After lots of exciting adventures, chases between the stars, etc., Trehearne recovers the lost secret and broadcasts it to the Galaxy, thereby earning the respect of some people and the hatred of others.

Worth reading, but not exceptional.

MUTANT *Henry Kuttner (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 9/6.*

This is a collection of the “Baldy” stories published under the Lewis Padgett pseudonym in ASF, and it does regrettably show the distinction of being a collection. Although connected in theme, the stories have different characters and are too wide-spread in time sequence to permit of them being turned into a novel, although an effort has been made to connect by making them the “memories” of a crashed airplane pilot.

The five tales cover a period of some two hundred years, from the time the “Baldies”—telepathic mutants resulting from the “blow-up”—who are “normal” start their underground conflict with the separate mutant strain who are paranoid, and continue to follow the major incidents in this conflict until the discovery of a method to make all men, Baldy or not, telepathic.

It cannot be denied that the stories are excellent, and although it is possible that Mr. Kuttner’s portrayal of a telepathic minority trying to co-exist with a non-telepathic race has since been equalled it has not been excelled. Four of the stories were published in 1945, and the fifth in 1953. Which makes the major part of the book almost ten years old—but still fine reading today. If you have not already read these yarns, I recommend them. If you want to re-read them—and I expect you will—here is your chance.

THE GREEN AND RED PLANET by *Hubertus Strughold (Sidgwick & Jackson), 7/6.*

Writing not “down to,” but in fashion understandable to the layman, Dr. Strughold extrapolates from known Terran conditions to discover the possibility of life “as we know it” existing on Mars; qualifying his extrapolations by the astronomical knowledge we have of Mars. He supports his text with a number of illustrations and graphs which are self-explanatory, and he ends the book with an excellent bibliography and an adequate index.

Should you wish to be informed in accordance with modern scientific knowledge, buy this book and read it.

Other books received include an exhaustive and beautifully produced 345-page **HISTORY OF ASTRONOMY** by Giorgio Abetti. This is a must for all those who have a deep interest in the facts of that basic subject of science-fiction, astronomy, and is published by Sidgwick and Jackson at 25/-.

SCIENTI FILM PREVIEWS

News and advance Film Reviews Direct from Hollywood's

FORREST J. ACKERMAN

Apologia by the Author: How fortunate for me that some scientist has not yet devised a long distance neck-wringer, or Editor Hamilton would be mercilessly employing it on me. I am airing him my column an unconscionable two weeks beyond deadline—and at that am finding time to write it only during the last half hour before my midnight departure for San Francisco and the 12th World Science Fiction Convention, where we all expect to see such films as Richard Matheson's "Born of Man and Woman," Ivan Tor's "Beyond," Rick Strauss' "Duel in Space," and other previews. George Pal phones me, however, that he unfortunately is still in the process of dubbing **THE CONQUEST OF SPACE**, so it will not be possible to show it at the Convention. I have read a copy of the shooting script, however, and the completed picture will follow this plot: A man-made satellite has been established as a jumping off station for Moon trip #1. The Wheel, as it is popularly called, is under the command of Col. Samuel Merritt. Second in command is his son, Capt. Barney Merritt.

Barney does not share his father's enthusiasm for the task before them. Unlike the Colonel, he has no interest in probing the unknown. At the same time, he bitterly resents the fact he is the only

man on The Wheel who did not volunteer. He had been married only three months when his father pulled strings to have him assigned to the space station. Once again, the Colonel refuses to transfer him back to earth.

Of the several dozen men on The Wheel, six are being trained to make the trip to the moon. The Wheel's doctor keeps a close check on the physical condition of this sextet. They are put on a special diet and are constantly undergoing physical examinations.

A transport rocket arrives from earth bringing supplies, replacement troops and Dr. George Fenton (William Hopper), noted scientist. Fenton notifies Merritt of his promotion to general and then hands him secret orders. Merritt stares at them in disbelief. He is ordered to proceed immediately to the planet Mars!

Merritt explodes and tells Fenton that such a mission is senseless and hopeless. The scientist argues that it is no more dangerous than a trip to the moon but Merritt reminds him there is a slight difference of several million miles. Merritt reluctantly agrees when Fenton informs him the mission is vital—the very survival of man depends upon the success of this or some future search for badly needed raw materials. Fenton hands Barney his orders returning him to earth but the cap-

tain tears them up and tells his father he is ready to leave also.

The next day, the rocket blasts off The Wheel and starts its journey to Mars. Moments after the take-off the men discover a stowaway — Sgt Mahoney. Merritt is angry but smiles affectionally when Mahoney explains he couldn't stay behind while his Army friend went off on a dangerous mission.

Later, Barney hears his father reading aloud from the Bible. He is frightened by his father's behaviour, particularly when Merritt keeps insisting they are invading the sacred domain of the Lord.

Days later, the ship arrives on Mars. The men are almost killed when Merritt refuses to land the rocket but Barney seizes the controls and manages to bring it in safely. Merritt remains inside while the others get out.

A few minutes later, Barney notices water escaping from the water valves. Merritt draws a revolver, orders Barney back, fires at him. Barney tries to take the gun away from him and in the ensuing scuffle Merritt is killed.

Mahoney enters at that moment. His face livid with fury, he tells Barney he would kill him now but says he would rather wait and be a witness at his court-martial when they return to earth. The men silently bury Merritt on Mars.

Barney is now in command. He tells the men they must ration the little water that is left, explains they can't leave the planet until it is in a certain position relative to the earth which may take months. Meanwhile, he and the others fill up huge sacks with samples of the soil to take back with them.

Months go by and Mahoney does not lose any of his bitterness towards Barney and repeatedly reminds him of their date at the court-martial hearing. Finally, the date of departure arrives. The men are preparing to leave when an earthquake rocks the planet and jars the ship. The men stare at the ship in horror. It is leaning badly to one side. A take-off from this position is impossible.

The men desperately try to straighten the ship but it is a hopeless task. Barney finally stops working, walks over to his father's grave and stands there in silent prayer. He starts back when the ground suddenly starts crumbling beneath his feet. Before he can retreat, he is up to his knees and sinking rapidly as in quicksand.

Tossing one end of a rope to Siegle and Imoto, Mahoney leaps into the sand and pulls Barney out. When Barney tries to thank him, Mahoney acidly replies that he was only saving him for their date on earth.

Suddenly, Siegle points to the sand. In a narrow line, stretching as far as they can see, there is continuous movement of the earth, indicating the existence of underground cavities. This gives Barney an idea. If they can open the cavities by blasting the rocks, they might be able to draw off enough dirt to straighten the ship.

To tell you more would probably spoil your enjoyment of what promises to be another good scientifilm, so at this point I'll sign off, but will be back with more film reviews for you next time.



WALTER A. WILLIS

Looks at British fandom

"i" No. 1, E. C. Tubb, A. V. Clarke and J. S. Mackenzie, 5, Hans Place, London, S.W.1. 42 pages, 1/6 per copy.

To say that this is better than most first issues would be not only an understatement but irrelevant. An understatement because in fact it's better than most umpteenth issues, and irrelevant because in a sense it's not a first issue at all. All the editors are experienced writers or publishers and in the London Circle they have such a repository of unrealised resources that only a catalyst was needed to produce a magazine which can take its place at the top without going through any of the usual tedious intermediate processes. Outstanding among the contents of this issue are a telling satire on fan organisers by Nigel Lindsay, a thoughtful article by Stuart Mackenzie about children's "space" toys (he points out that for the first time children are playing with toys which do not simulate the existing adult world), a serious instructive article by Bryan Berry about the lesser-known non-fantasy works of August Derleth which will be of avid interest to all fans interested in the lesser-known non-fantasy works of August Derleth, a brilliant piece of fannish mythology by Ted Tubb, a charming little fannish vignette by Daphne Buckmaster, and an analysis of

the fan by John Brunner. Everything in the magazine is well worth reading and its sole defect is the impression it gives of a rather unsympathetic editorial personality, unfortunate in a magazine so thoroughly esoteric. It seems to me that the natural hostility of the newcomer to things he doesn't understand should be met by an editorial attitude which goes out of its way to be friendly and welcoming — things which fans in fact are. Allowances should be made however for the inevitable defects of anything composed by an editorial board, and it's very pleasant to see London returning to fan activity, especially with a production as good as this.

THE NEW FUTURIAN, No. 2, J. M. Rosenblum, 7, Grosvenor Park, Chapel Allerton, Leeds, 7, England, 42 pages, 9d. per copy.

This revival of a famous war-time magazine fills very satisfactorily a gap I've been bemoaning for some time. It's that rare phenomenon, a really good fan magazine which deals primarily with science fiction. Since this is what most newcomers innocently expect a science fiction fan magazine to be like, The New Futurian is a good one for them to start with. They'll find a vast amount of interesting discussion ranging from Eric Hopkins' vehement asser-

tion that "science fiction is rubbish" (compared, apparently, with Shakespeare, the Bible, Thucydides and Ray Bradbury) to John Brunner's interesting theory that present-day science fiction stories are more accomplished than the classic short stories of the past because all the techniques have been worked out. There is also the second installment of Walter Gillings' history of English fandom, which is still dealing with the origins of English science fiction. In fact so far it has read more like an autobiography of Walter Gillings, but then that's only to be expected. Gillings is the father of both English fandom and English s-f, and his procreative reminiscences have their place in history.

The only item I'd find fault with in this magazine is an article about the Mount Palomar telescope which, though interesting enough, has its spiritual home in a popular science journal. But then I always feel that way about science articles in science fiction magazines. The way I look at it, science is the bugbear of science fiction. The more science you know the less science fiction you can enjoy. And I don't mean that as a criticism of the stories. It seems to me that the true importance of science fiction is not as a sort of suggestion box for inventors, as Gernsback seems to think, nor as a literary genre, as Hopkins and Brunner would have it, but rather as an intellectual stimulant. A little learning leads you into the dangers of mental quibbling with the author about minor scientific errors in his story and overlooking its merits as an exercise in the creative imagination. And after all, most of the great

things that have been done in the world have been the work of people who went and did them before they knew they were impossible. Whereas it had to be a real scientific expert who could sit down and prove that aeroplanes couldn't fly.

ORION, No. 5, *Paul Enever, 9, Churchill Avenue, Hillingdon, Middlesex, England, 36, pages (small size), 5d. per copy.*

This issue of the best bargain in fandom contains a delightful piece of humorous writing by that wayward genius Bob Shaw, a fascinating column by George Whiting, a really excellent piece of serious fiction by someone masquerading under the name of James Keeping, and the editor's own agreeably written comments on various matters of interest. Heartily recommended. This is the magazine that was so unfairly reviewed in a rival science-fiction magazine recently, but if you write for it on my recommendation and aren't satisfied I will personally refund your money. I don't think I'll have to start saving up.

THE MEDWAY JOURNAL
LITERARY AND NEWS
SUPPLEMENT, *Brian Lewis and Tony Thorne, 21, Granville Road, Gillingham, Kent, England, 4½d. per issue.*

News, reviews and comments on the pro and fan world interestingly written and well presented.

My apologies to the other editors whose reviews were crowded out. Next time perhaps.



GUIDED MISSIVES

Letters to the Editor



DEAR SIR: This is the first time I have written to the editor of a science fiction magazine, but I wish to congratulate you on your fine magazine. I have read the first eight issues, and I believe that NEBULA is second only to the American edition of GALAXY.

I think the best author you have had is Eric Frank Russell, and I hope you continue to have more of him.

In your eighth issue I liked "Fly away Peter" best, followed closely by "Blaze of Glory." "Episode" and "Weather Station" were also good, but I thought "Wind Along the Waste" was too short.

I would like it if you had more illustrations. Your artists are good, so let's see more of their work.

In ending I would like to offer my best wishes for your continued success.

PERRY S. HUNTOON,
NEW JERSEY, U.S.A.

**Thanks for the kind words Mr. Huntoon. I'm glad to see you are enjoying NEBULA so much.*

You will notice that more recent editions have carried more illustrations than previously, this and the inclusion of many fine new Russell stories at present in my files, will be my policy for all future numbers.

DEAR ED: As a completely casual reader of science-fiction magazines I want to dissuade
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you from using so many readers departments in "Nebula."

I am not in the least interested in Fanzine reviews because I do not wish to get to know the fans. I never read hard cover books and therefore am not keen to know just what is newly published in that line either. I find the "Scientifilm Previews" only of very passing interest.

I am writing this as I think that the vast majority will be in complete agreement with me and because I think you would do well to print stories which please everyone rather than "departments" which are of interest to only a small minority.

It's the stories that sell the magazine, you know.

JOHN SAMUEL, STIRLING.

**Well, John there are at least 113 pages of stories to only 15 pages of depts in a normal issue and I must say that I think that a large percentage of readers enjoy the depts much more than you do. After all, if I didn't publish a dept called "Guided Missives" your letter could never have seen print.*

DEAR ED: Nebula No. 9 was so good, that I had to break down and tell you about it. Not one weak story in the lot, and just about all the yarns should appeal both to the newcomer, and the "old-stager."

Tubb's yarn, was excellent from the word go, but Heinlein's was saved only by his excellent

style . . . actually, that plot has been done to death . . . so much so, that I really wonder if a psychosis or what-have-you, could actually *be* cured in a semi-urgent manner. "Curtain Call" went beautifully right up to the end. "Aspect," almost tied with it, but seemed worthy of a broader canvas. "Alcoholic Ambassador," was pure, but well written, corn. "Cul de Sac," was not actually bad, but had too many loopholes. If the kid could read any mind with such unpractised ease, how could his teacher (and others) set traps for him without giving them away? and if the kid was so darned smart, he wouldn't have fallen for them.

The cover is a real gem, who collects *that* one? and the interiors hit a new high, "Greengrass" is not unlike Cartier in style, but some of his work seemed to resemble that of Clothier. Not that I care, so long as you hang on to him. Three cheers for the F.A.S.

The special features were all uniformly good, but here, I have one quibble. Practically every pro-mag, *and* fan-mag, seems to run book reviews . . . often, they even overlap and cover the same book. I realise this is not exactly a drawback, as it gives a wider view, but surely, with all this coverage, couldn't you remove this department, and give the space to stories, letters, features, or anything else needing a few more pages? Not that I level any criticism against Ken, he reviews fairly and well, but there is after all, a glut in that line.

Ackerman's film reviews are improving, as he now spends less time explaining how he fraternises with the various stars and

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Anachronism	
Closing Time	
The Marriage Prompters	
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By Needle and Thread	
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Name and Address	

The result of the Poll on the stories in NEBULA No. 8 was as follows:—

FLY AWAY PETER	
By Eric Frank Russell	34.3%
EPISODE	
By E. C. Tubb	28.8%
BLAZE OF GLORY	
By E. R. James	24.1%
WEATHER STATION	
By Sydney J. Bounds	9.2%
WIND ALONG THE WASTE	
By Kenneth Potter	3.6%

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recorded music and SF—Nebula Box F.

movie moguls. More power to his
elbow.

Walt Willis has also an excel-
lent column.

TERRY JEEVES,

SHEFFIELD.

**Thanks for the letter, Terry,
I'm glad you enjoyed Number
Nine so much. Why don't all
you other readers give me your
opinions this time? Your letters
let me know what you like (and
dislike) and with them in mind I
can go ahead and try to please
everyone!*

*And, of course, if you don't
feel like writing a letter there is
always the Ballot Form on page
123.*

DEAR SIR: As I remarked in a
previous letter I think your maga-
zine is a magnificent publication,
and at present the best in the field
of British Science-Fiction. The
following stories I class as being
excellent: *Troublemaker*, *Destiny
is my Enemy* (5); *Firstling*, *Sus-
tained Pressure*, *The Happier
Eden* (6); and in (7) *Pilot's Hands*
and *Cold Storage*. For a first pro-
zine story *Gorgon Planet* was
also very good.

Like most of your readers I
have liked the covers of *Nebula*
more than other magazines. I
thought Ken McIntyre showed
talent.

Many science-fiction readers,
like myself, are very ignorant
about facts concerning the writers
of science-fiction stories. For
example a fan may want to know
the answers to questions like
these. I do:—

- (1) What are Robert Heinlein's
pen names?
- (2) How old is Eric Frank
Russell?
- (3) What are the professions of

Excitement Romance Thrills

IN

"AMERSF"

some of the well-known sf writers?

Could you start a page to answer readers' queries on science-fiction, apart from Guided Missives? I am sure many fans would enjoy this.

Lastly, for heaven's sake DON'T have cartoons. I want to read stories, not look at some badly-drawn cartoons. I am not one of these juvenile imbeciles who only like magazines and papers if there are plenty of cartoons and comic strips in them.

Once again, best wishes to *Nebula*; become monthly soon PLEASE; and keep up the good standard.

N. A. JACKSON, Jr.
MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA.

** Thanks for a very interesting letter Nigel, you have some worthwhile ideas there. Write again, won't you?*

DEAR ED.: I have just bought *Nebula* 9. Oh boy, oh joy, what a cover! Clothier is about the best British science-fiction artist. I think the cover would have been better though if Clothier had left out the coach, and I like my stars to look like circles, not asterisks, but this is *Nebula's* best cover.

Glad to see Heinlein's name. The reason that there is so much American science-fiction printed is that they write science-fiction much better than we do. Why not be honest, and admit it, Ed.?

Curtain Call, I thought, was good. The part I liked best was putting in the three aliens. A masterstroke! Glad you tell us who illustrates the different stories. How about captions for

the pictures. I don't think much of Clothier's picture. His interiors aren't nearly as good as his covers.

I don't quite see where Wright gets his title from. *Cul De Sac* is quite a good story. However, there has been so much written about gifted children, especially telepathic, that one tends to say "What, another?"

I liked *Alcoholic Ambassador*. I thought it was funny. Also, as far as I know, it had a novel idea. I was quite fond of Cooney and his pink mice by the time it had finished.

Aspect was good. Very good. How about a couple of sequels?

Project One was all right, but that was all one could say for it. Oh, well. Aren't the novels a lot shorter nowadays than in your first issue? Can't say I like the first illustration. The second one is all right, though.

I think that *Nebula* is the best British magazine, but I don't agree with John Greengrass, when he says that it's "as good as any American science-fiction publication on the market."

IVOR MAYNE,
LONDON, N4.

** Many thanks for your lengthy letter of comment on NEBULA No. 9, Ivor, I only wish there had been room to print more of it.*

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Far from admitting that Americans can write better science fiction than we do, I would suggest that you belong to a thankfully small percentage of my readers who seem to possess a kind of aggravated inferiority complex whenever British and American science-fiction books or magazines are compared. As I mentioned in my last Editorial, there are many British authors who are VERY popular in the States — Russell, McIntosh and Temple, to name only those who have also appeared in NEBULA—and with the presence of two British science-fiction magazines like NEBULA and THE VARGO STATTON MAGAZINE, both of which have the courage to foster new British writing and illustrating talent in this country (a job no American editor would ever want to do) British science-fiction will continue to be the finest in the world.

DEAR MR. HAMILTON: Nebula No. 9 was about the best issue yet; the cover was superb, certainly the best I've seen on any British magazine. You have a poll of each issue to find the best story, why not do the same with the "Special Features"?

The stories were all of a good standard, though Cul-de-sac is a theme that's been used many times before.

I think it's the first time ever that I've preferred a short story to the novel in any magazine, but James White's was a very good story indeed; I liked the "twist."

JOHN B. HALL,
LONDON, S.W.19.

** Well, what do other readers think of my "Special Features"?*

DEAR MR. HAMILTON: I congratulate you on your inclusion, in this edition, of the neat little story "Aspect" by Bob Shaw. To me, it was a new slant on an old idea and very well put over. Another "slant" story, "Cul de Sac" was, in my opinion, well told. "Curtain Call" was also very good indeed; written as it was, by James White, one could expect a good, neat plot.

I also thoroughly enjoyed "Alcoholic Ambassador" by Dan Morgan and "Ordeal in Space" by Heinlein. Personally, I don't think that the lack of normal conditions would have such a permanent effect on man in space as depicted in the latter story. Surely, man is such an adaptable animal that, in time, his representatives in space will accustom themselves to the gulfs about them. Still, it is, and will remain for the time being, an unsolved problem and as I remarked before, I enjoyed the story.

Finally, there is Tubb's "Project One." Again, a very interesting and enjoyable yarn although I thought that the enemy's machine was very obliging when it remained in its fixed orbit to be potted at at will by the defenders.

I think that, on the whole, No. 9 was the best issue of Nebula yet. Keep up the good work! That cover of yours, slightly improved this time also, but, to be quite honest, I still don't like it much. Believe me, on a stand, on the counter of a shop, or anywhere, it is the cover which first attracts the new reader. Now I don't expect you to change your cover policy to please me, but I do urge you to consider it. Neither

would I expect or wish you to copy American styles.

Among fans, I gather that there were persistent rumours that *Nebula* had ceased publication, when you failed to appear for so long. I think that this should be strongly contradicted in your next issue, not only for the benefit of fans, but also for dealers. There is also a field of opinion which considers that 2/- is too much to pay for a magazine of this kind; particularly when so many others can be had for 1/6d.

ALF GREGORY,
BISHOP AUCKLAND.

**Believe me, Mr. Gregory, I realise only too fully the selling power of a cover, but you may be surprised when I tell you that Bob Clothier usually paints a supremely good seller—the one he did for Issue No. 9 was his best to date and the present one promises to be even better.*

The price of NEBULA is directly responsible for the high quality of the stories I print. NEBULA pays higher fees to authors than any other British science-fiction magazine and consequently costs a little extra to its readers, but prints the "pick" of the best stories available.

NEBULA will appear regularly throughout the winter season and beyond, as I promised in my last issue and there is absolutely no fear of its ceasing publication—on the contrary, its sales and popularity are surpassing even my rosiest expectations.

STOP PRESS

As this issue goes to press we are pleased to inform you that we have newly received the results of the Space Times Research Bureau's Survey of British Fandom and science-fiction readers, which was conducted in *Nebula* No. 7.

The results received prove to be extremely interesting reading, so we intend to publish them in full for the benefit of all our readers, in the next issue of *Nebula*.

As every keen reader will be anxious to obtain a copy of this number, supplies are likely to be very short so avoid disappointment by ordering your copy now!

by Jack Wilson, is my offering to you this time. I hope you will enjoy it.

* * *

Since the announcement in my last Editorial regarding authors mss., I have received a greatly increased volume of these for consideration and am letting the authors concerned have my decision on their mss. in as short a time as possible. Naturally, the mss. I attend to first are those which are pleasantly presented and *typed* (double spaced) on one

side of white paper. If you want to send me a story and cannot get it typed for you, I would suggest rather than sending it in written by hand, which makes for eyestrain and bad tempers in the editorial office, that you contact the FANTASY SECRETARY, 6, Thorpe Close, Silverdale, Sydenham, London, S.E.26. They can type and correct mss. for a very reasonable fee and the improved appearance of your stories will make any expense involved well worth while.

Peter Hamilton



"Don't be silly, dear, it's a Weather Balloon!"

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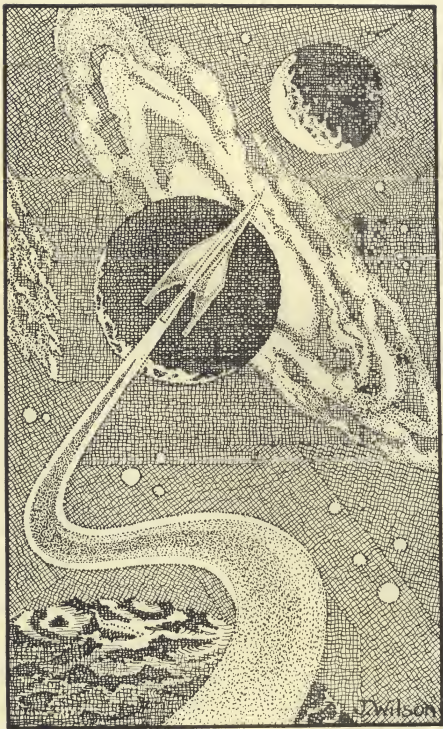
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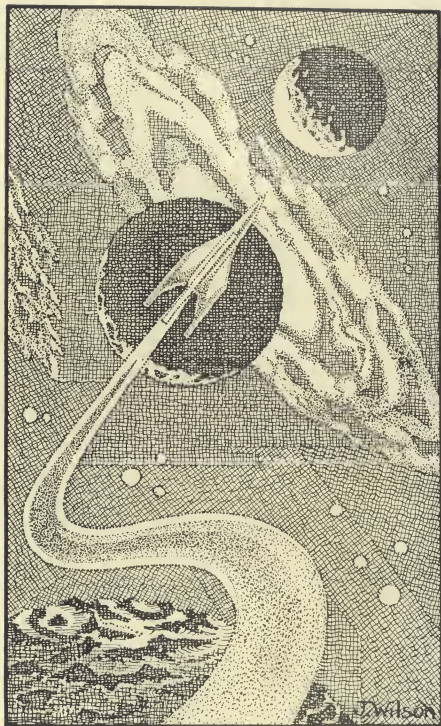
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